

MEETING VLADO KRESLIN¹

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Rick and I are stuck in the dumpiest terminal at Charles de Gaulle, watching the departure board. We're in some kind of existential pas de deux here, the board and I, while we wait out a nine-hour layover. I check email. Write Vlado. Eat jambon et beurre on a stale baguette. Read Vlado's reply. Walk up and down the terminal five, six, twenty times. Watch the departure board.

Five dreary hours later Ljubljana comes up on the board. To celebrate, I make another circuit of the terminal and glance up at the board.

The post for Ljubljana is gone.

"The flight has been canceled. We'll have more information for you in a little while." The perky ticket person flashes a patronizing smile. "We will call you."

"Is there a problem with the plane?"

"We will have more information for you *later*." The smile is still there but the eyes say, *Shoo. Go away*.

"Later" is what parents tell their children when they really mean "No."

I dash off another email to Vlado: "The flight's cancelled. We're trying to work something out. Keep your fingers crossed." A vision of us hitching a ride in the rain to Ljubljana pops into my mind.

Vlado writes back: "Mamma mia! Oh no!" and from Eva, his wife who is to cook dinner for us: "Oh my god, this is really bad luck!"

Bad luck? Oh, yeah. And we've come so far—4940 miles or 7950 kilometers, take your pick. Only two hours by plane stand between Ljubljana and us, and we're stuck in Paris for another eternity.

¹ This text is an early chapter in a forthcoming, authorized account of the author's conversations with Vlado Kreslin, the Slovene folk-rock singer-songwriter. The chapter establishes the relationship among the primary characters. Kreslin, has invited a timid Texas housewife and her husband to his house in Ljubljana. The couple was to attend his concert in Kranj in early 2010. It was canceled, and Kreslin takes pity on them. So begins the friendship between the author, who initially knows nothing about Slovenia, and Kreslin.

The perky ticket person calls us up to her desk. With as much grace as she can muster while dealing with such dolts as we, she informs us that the plane experienced mechanical problems and will not be arriving that night. “We can send you to Zagreb. From there you may go to Ljubljana. If you like...” She dangles the offer in front of us.

We pounce. Of course we’ll go to Zagreb. We’d love to go to Zagreb. Going to Zagreb is nothing for seasoned travelers like us. A mere trifle, really. She smiles, we smile. The ticket machine spits out new boarding passes. She staples our luggage tags to them with the delight of someone squishing a bug, and off we dash to catch the flight.

By taking the escalator down to this gate we pass from Western Europe to Somewhere Else, a place of deep snows and dark forests, castles jutting out from high mountains. Waiting for us at the end of the journey is a man with a black guitar.

We get to stand in the rain after all, waiting to board, but just to show that yes, every once in a while life really is magical, it begins to snow.

A flight is a flight is a flight. Still, a Macedonian girl, two women, and Rick and me make up a merry band of five. We’re fighting our way to Ljubljana against all odds, or at least iffy airport service, stuck together in an ersatz camaraderie. As soon as the two women, English teachers in a school in Ljubljana, discover our reason for heading there, they chortle, “Oh, Vlado! Everyone knows Vlado. You should call him *Vladek*. It means ‘little Vlado’.”

Evidently Vlado is everyone’s best friend.

Vladek? I cringe. I can’t call him that. I don’t even know the man and already I should call him *Vladek*? For all I know he might insist I call him Mr. Kreslin. No, it’s *Gospod Kreslin*? Or is it *Gospoud Kreslin*? Something like that. I munch my salmon paté sandwich—which is very good, much better than whatever Rick ends up with—and try to reconcile the Slovene formality I’ve read is imperative with the laid back casualness I’ve seen so far.

Surely the airline will put us on another flight when we get to Zagreb. Wrong. They hustle us out to a van with barely enough time for me to hit the WC. “Ljubljana isn’t far,” they assure us, “no more than an hour or two. Really, a bus is much faster. Besides, only five of you are traveling to Slovenia, and with the snow...”

The airline men shrug. We shrug.

We crawl into the van and settle in for what, please God, will be a boring ride. If all goes well, we’ll pick up a car at the airport and find our way to the Hotel Slon. In the snow. After midnight. In a foreign country

with an incomprehensible language. All this because a stranger in a strange land said, “Come, I will play for you in my flat, and my wife will make for you a good Slovene meal.”

We’re crazy. Yes, we are.

We ease out of the airport and trundle off through the snow towards Ljubljana.

I’ve been awake for twenty-four hours now. God only knows what I say to the teachers. One of them asks me to sing a Vlado song but I’m so tired I can’t find the tune, let alone carry it. They talk with the driver. They talk with the Macedonian girl. Back and forth, back and forth. It’s like being on a bus headed to camp.

I feel like a spy in a trench coat and hat, sneaking into the country under the cover of a blizzard. I have the hat, but it doesn’t make me look mysterious, and the only thing I can sneak is a yawn.

Only one, though. The second one dies in my mouth.

Lights on the hilltops catch my eyes. Alabaster churches wink into view, first one, then another, and another one still, each lit up by transcendent golden light and surrounded by deep blue snow. Mouth still open, I press my nose against the window. I forget the yawn, forget how tired I am, forget everything in that cold and crystal moment except the fairy tale magic of those exquisite lights.

Vlado’s country.

The teachers jump off at a gas station to catch a bus going straight into Ljubljana. The Macedonian girl and the two of us head on to the airport—she to catch her flight to Skopje and we because our rental car waits there. Right? Of course it does. Avis won’t let us down.

Avis lets us down. Getting in after midnight probably has something to do with it.

The airport is deserted. We haul our luggage off the bus while the Macedonian girl dashes over to some security guards. The guards shake their heads at her, and she turns away, looking like a lost puppy.

So instead of being stuck at Charles de Gaulle for who knows how long, we’re stuck at Brnik Airport. Avis is closed. Everything is closed. I look at Rick. Rick looks at me. It’s going to be another long night.

“I can take you.”

English? Can it be there is still one last taxi driver at Brnik Airport, and she speaks English? Hallelujah, yes. The taxi driver gestures to her van.

Vlado said they would charge us twenty-five euros to go into Ljubljana. She charges us nine and drops us at the Hotel Slon.

The elevator is the size of a birdcage. How can we ever fit our two suitcases, two laptops, a purse and our weary bodies into that space? Walking up the stairs is not an option. I can't even find the stairs.

Said elevator groans as we squeeze into it. You'd think it had never carried anyone before. We each straddle a bag. I brace my head against the back wall to keep from falling over. The elevator chugs upwards and, trembling, opens up at the correct hallway.

Despite the last twenty four hours—canceled flights, canceled reservations, mysterious ferryings through even more mysterious countrysides—we tumble into our room. Somehow, without falling on the floor, we get our clothes off and collapse onto the bed. I desperately need sleep. It's nearly two a.m. Today we meet Vlado.

But first, an email to Eva since she'll be cooking dinner.

I can handle meeting this rock star Vlado Kreslin and his family. Sure I can. I'll just pretend I'm dreaming. That way I won't make an awful fool of myself.

I turn off the light. Watch the ceiling in the dark. Wonder if we'll make a good impression—being quasi-semi-sort of ambassadors for Texas, America even, and all that. I worry about slippers and fall asleep.

Morning tiptoes into the room and pricks us in the eyes. We haul our jet-lagged bodies out of bed—Rick to shower and me to fret. I have a nine o'clock appointment to call Vlado. It's only seven. Two hours of worrying. Plenty of time to build up a nasty case of nerves over breakfast.

Never have I seen such food at breakfast as the buffet at the Slon—eggs, bacon, sausages, hams, steaks, mushrooms, fried potatoes, tomatoes, cheeses, cereals, fruit pickles, pineapples, oranges, bananas, kiwis, toast, bagels, sticky buns, doughnuts, muffins, breads, jams, jellies, honeys, yogurts, fish, oatmeal, coffee, tea, juices, hot cocoa, and milk. It's heaven for the hungry.

If I were smart, I'd settle for toast and a cup of water for breakfast. Slovenes feed their guests copious amounts of food—the breakfast banquet tells me this – but I don't get the implications. I missed dinner the night before. One quarter of a salmon paste sandwich doesn't constitute dinner in anyone's stomach. So I pile sausages and potatoes and mushrooms, and more mushrooms, and even more mushrooms onto my plate and thread my way through the crowd to a table by a window.

Ljubljana in winter morning's early light: It snows, then it doesn't snow, and then contrary-wise it snows again. Fat flakes fall onto spiky strips sticking up from the windowsills. Some kind of anti-pigeon device, although what self-respecting pigeon would be caught dead flying around in this cold? Quite a few, it turns out. They dip and soar and spin in the snow, and then, once their show is finished, huddle under the eaves across the street and stare beady-eyed at us.

Rick and I talk about the usual over-breakfast things—how we slept (fine), what ached (everything), how good the food was (very) and the pillows (less so). Every five minutes I ask what time is it? He tells me. We talk some more, and then again I ask what time is it. After the fifth or sixth time I merely point at my wrist and he shows me his watch. It's less intrusive that way, especially when chewing.

There comes a point, though, when you've had all the breakfast you can stand. It's finally quarter to nine. I have a call to make. My stomach cramps up into a bubble-gum sized wad of fear.

However, I've come halfway around the world to make this phone call. If I get so scared that I throw up, then so be it. Praying my breakfast stays down, I punch in the cell number.

A gravelly voice says something like "hello" and "eh" rolled into one. If I haven't punched in the right number, this will be a most unproductive conversation.

"Hello? Vlado Kreslin? This is Ruth—"

"Ruth! Where are you? Mamma mia! Are you okay?"

I collapse on the bed in relief. "It was the best adventure! It was great!!" It *was* great. The whole mess had been a delight, akin to hacking away at a jungle to arrive at Shambhala. Totally worth it. Isn't this the man I've been corresponding with for months? Why would I be afraid of him? To top it off, I haven't made a fool of myself. Yet. That makes it an absolute miracle of an adventure.

"An adventure? Good, good, haha! We had adventures, too, in Africa. We just got back from holiday. We had this happen, and we had that happen—you know how it goes, but we had a great time! An adventure! Now, for lunch you need to go to the As, around the corner from the Slon. It really is the best, and then go up to the castle this afternoon, and then the market by the river. You will like it. I will pick you up at six. Goodbye."

I put the phone down. It rings again. "At five. I will pick you up at five."

Ljubljana looks frumpy in snow, frumpy and exotic and eerily familiar, like a dowager aunt from the old country. Dark windows like marcasite jewels are set in the dull skin of her buildings. It isn't her fault that she looks frumpy. Dirty snow does that to even the most beautiful city. I expected Ljubljana to be exotic. After the journey of the day before, I wouldn't be surprised to find the city on a different planet. But the familiarity shocks me. While I'm still half asleep she sweeps me up in her arms and kisses my cheeks.

So red cheeked and wary, I crunch through the ice down the sidewalk.

Sure enough, around the corner and halfway down the block is the courtyard to the As. What if I end up ordering something like chewy tongue in squid tartare? On this snowy day that cries out for stick-to-the-ribs food, I better go with something safe. Like salad..

Or maybe not. I've already forgotten my gargantuan breakfast and my dinner to come. The menu has English subtitles, and the description of the dishes looks seductive. The wait staff gloriously, wondrously speaks English. We just might survive this.

Tonight Vlado will pick us up to have dinner at his house. I'm not thinking about this, not at all. Thinking about it will make me worry. If I worry too much, I'll get sick. But if I don't worry, I'll forget something. So I worry – but in measured doses—about all sorts of things: Slippers. Manners. Gifts. It's customary to bring gifts. Everyone gets gifts. That's great if you know what your host likes, but if not? Traditionally, the gifts are wine for the host, flowers for the hostess and candy for the children.

How hard can that be?

I have no idea how traditional the Kreslins are, but why tinker with a blueprint that works? Since we're coming from Texas, I wanted all the gifts to be Texas-themed. The children are easy—Lammes pecan pralines. A Texas wine for Vlado.

“You think the wine is okay?”

“You worry too much.” Rick sips the red Slovene vintage we ordered. It's a fabulous wine. Of course it is. He chose it.

“What about the pralines? The kids may not like them.” The pralines were my idea. That makes them suspect.

“Stop worrying.”

“But what about Eva?”

Yes, what about Eva? I could get her a cactus. Maybe not. With all those prickles it could send the wrong message. Bluebonnets? No way would I find bluebonnets here. They're too temperamental to grow in Slovenia. I can't even get them to grow in Texas. I have to find a local florist and explain with my non-existent Slovene what I want.

So, after a lunch of boar and pasta and too much wine, we slosh through the snow to find a florist a few blocks from the Hotel Slon. Maybe with enough finger pointing we can communicate. If nothing else, there's always roses.

"Dober dan," I say to the girl behind the counter. This tells her right off the bat that we're not Slovene, not even European and probably have trouble conjugating simple verbs no matter where we come from. It's the curse of the southern accent. "Do you speak English?"

"Ye-es."

So it's a tentative yes. It's still a yes. She even smiles at us. That's more than most French would give us. And I've given the proper polite greeting so we don't seem like total hicks. It's a success so far.

But what to get Eva from this hothouse jungle? Even more important, what will survive the trip from the florist to the hotel in the blizzard? The last thing I want to do is show up with a bunch of dead and dying flowers. Jade plants, anthuriums, bromeliads, succulent—would any of these survive the trek to the hotel? Nope. Roses? Maybe not.

But there's an orchid, a little cymbidium, sticking its head up from behind some undefined greenery. My daughter has grown a cymbidium for years and it survives all sorts of trauma—lack of heat, lack of water, cats. This one is beautiful, perky with white petals trimmed in pinky-purple, and small enough to stick inside my coat. After paying for it, of course.

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"It's time," says Rick.

My stomach ties itself into knots all over again.

We grab the gifts and catch the elevator. Will Vlado be formal? I've heard Slovenes were formal. This is crazy. No matter what country they're from, musical icons don't do this, just up and meet with fans they've never seen before. Not with folks like us. He doesn't have to do this. Why is he doing this? He won't like us. He won't like me.

In the time it takes for the elevator to creep to the lobby and spit us out, I work myself into a righteous swivet. We set up camp by some chairs at the front window. Rick sits; I stand. I pace. I practice what little Slovene I know—"Dober dan, Gospod Kreslin." Good day, Mr. Kreslin. No, no,

that's not right. It's evening. Well, then "Zdravo, Gospod Kreslin." Hello, Mr. Kreslin. That's safe and reserved. And formal—just in case he's formal. He might be. "Dober dan..."

"That's him."

A stork-legged man wearing a knit cap lopes by outside, followed by a boy with a large camera. Sure enough, the man blows into the lobby and turns towards us.

I try desperately to remember what to say—"Zdravo, Gospod Kreslin." But I can't get the words out. My tongue has glued itself to the top of my mouth.

The man opens his arms and grins. "Ruth! I can't believe you're here!"

That makes two of us, Mr. Gospod Kreslin Vlado.

He sweeps me up in a bear hug, crushing my face against his chest. Then, still holding me close, he turns and grabs my husband's hand. "Rick! Hello, hello! This is my son, Naj—take pictures, take pictures."

Naj does so. At least I think he does. It's hard to tell with my face smushed against Vlado's chest. He squeezes me once again and says, "Eh, come on. Let's go!"

So much for being formal.

Like leaves drawn in the wake of the wind, we scurry after Vlado to the car. Rick ends up riding shotgun. Naj and I pile into the backseat. In the back I can hide behind Vlado. Much better to watch him.

I should have known anyone over fifty who dives off a concert stage into the audience might not be the most formal and reserved person in Slovenia.

Vlado talks as we inch down the street through the snow: "My youngest daughter and I were in Prekmurje visiting my parents, and a journalist friend who lives there came to see me. He asks if we're staying over. I say, no, no, we have to get back, some Americans are coming in from Texas. They were planning to go to the concert in Kranj but it was canceled. Then they got to Paris and their flight was canceled, and instead they were sent to Zagreb, and this and that... ehhhh. And my friend said 'What a great story.' He wants to interview you tomorrow."

Because we came to see Vlado? Who is this man?

I lean back against the seat and watch somber buildings go past. It's barely light enough to see through the gray falling snow. Night is almost here. Dinner lies ahead. Fish, Vlado had said. No telling what else.

Breakfast had been wonderful, but of course, it would be with mushrooms. Mushrooms cover a multitude of sins. Lunch was even better with the wine and pasta with wild boar. Now fish for dinner in Vlado's home, with his wife and children.

Darkness closes in.

The fun has just begun.

But what is that stench?

"Ewwww! Vlado!" Naj waves his hand in front of his face, laughing. And me? Mature person that I am, I bite my lip to keep from giggling.

I sniff again. It's not Vlado, unless he eats rubber for lunch.

The car merrily spins its wheels at the bottom of a hill while the men go over what might be causing the smell. Vlado opts for the belts; Rick blames the tires. Satisfied with the attention, the car lurches forward, and we crawl up, up, up the road and into Vlado's driveway. Naj heads into the house. Rick and Vlado do some male bonding by sticking their heads under the car's hood to make sure everything's okay.

I stumble through the doorway and start up the stairs. Steep stairs, and not only am I carrying gifts, including the fragile orchid which is probably squished by now, but my too long coat sweeps the steps in front of me. Graceful I ain't. I lean forward in my best bag lady imitation and waddle my way up.

My, but Vlado's got a ton of hats here. At least thirty of them hang above the entrance stairway, most of them fedoras but a few with larger brims, like homburgs. Maybe this wall is Vlado's hat cemetery, where his hats go when he retires them.

In a proper Slovene house, people either wear slippers or walk about in socks. Since guests don't usually bring slippers when visiting, a good host provides a selection of slippers in various sizes.

I have a hang-up about feet. I hate showing them, seeing them, touching them. I'd rather suck a slug. Had I thought about it, I'd have asked if I could bring my own slippers but maybe that's going too far. I sit on the bench and tug my boots off.

That's as far as I get when the men bustle up the stairs, telling everyone that the belts are fine, nothing's wrong with the car at all, it's just the tires and they're fine, too. Vlado bends down by my legs. I scoot my feet out of his way, demure on the outside but on the inside screaming, "Please, please don't touch them." He reaches under the bench and fetches

some slippers out for us. Puts a pair down by me. I tuck my feet as far under the bench as I can get them. He smiles. I smile. Safely shod, the men head into the kitchen. I wiggle my toes into my borrowed shoes and hurry after the men.

Just like back home, the kitchen is the place to be. Naj we've already met. Čarna's at the stove, cooking, and Ajdina, who is the youngest, regards us with a solemn look and doubtful eyes.

And Eva's there too. She's a perfect complement to Vlado. Dark hair, with eyes still like a child's and a face so familiar that I swear I know her. She's in the group photo taken at the Beltinška banda's anniversary party, in the back, smiling down away from the camera while Vlado is stretched out on the ground in the front. And so it is—Vlado out front and Eva in back. Vlado takes care of the music. Eva takes care of everything else.

The Kreslins' house buzzes with energy, full of vibrant colors—reds and oranges and yellows, a ton of open space, and windows everywhere overlooking Ljubljana. But right now all we see is snow, lots and lots of snow, blowing and falling, smothering dark lumps and dips, with deeper darks behind the house. Some of them move.

"Wolves followed my mother home from school one day," Eva says, looking out the window with us.

It's time to eat. We flutter about the table like birds to a feeder, finding chairs, sitting down, jumping up and changing chairs, with the kids popping in for soup and then scattering off again. We finally settle so Eva can place the first course on the table, a huge platter of smoked herring.

Vlado pours wine and passes around the herring. "These are from a friend of ours. He has a farm. They're very, very good."

I've never had herring in my life, but herring is fish, and fish is good. I take a bite. Dried smoked herring is even better. I take another bite. Oh, yes, indeed it is good. We all eat herring, and I thank the good Lord that it's not going to be a large meal.

Eva brings out more food—a salad of mâche dressed with pumpkinseed oil and slivered almonds, and steamed asparagus, potatoes, pineapple slices dusted with sugar and crushed mint leaves, bowls of pumpkin soup and baskets of bread.

Surely, this is it. Surely, there is no more.

The kids scurry back to the table. Ajdina's at the one end, Naj's between Vlado and me, and Čarna sits across the table beside Eva, when she's sitting. Rick commandeers the other end, closest to the bread.

Now Eva sets the main dish on the table. It's fish with white sauce and almonds, cooked to perfection. "Čarna's favorite dish."

In Slovenia it's impolite not to eat what you've been served but, oh my, all this food. I look at Eva's smiling face and the table groaning with this wonderful home-cooked delectable meal. Goodbye, diet. Hello, feast.

With enough time and enough wine—and Slovenes believe you must have both for a good meal—it's amazing how much you can eat. But at last, we're done. The End. Fini. There's no way I can eat another bite.

Then Eva brings out the dessert, an apple tart.

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Vlado, guitar in hand, sits down at the table. "I will be in Milwaukee in March. A theatre production. 'Three Other Sisters', and I will play this." He starts playing Dylan's "Boots of Spanish Leather."

"You'll be in the States?"

"Oh, sure. New York, Cleveland... There are a lot of Slovenes there, and in Milwaukee, too."

He then begins "Odhaja dan." I've gone through several glasses of wine by now, and, feeling brave, I start singing with him.

He stops. "You're singing."

Oh no. I've really done it. "I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd mind."

"But you're singing in Slovene." He's not smiling.

"Well, yes. That's how you sing it."

"But in Slovene!"

"I don't know it any other way!" I'm almost in tears by now.

We lock eyes, neither of us saying anything. I have no idea what's going through his mind, but I'm terrified he's about to chastise me for my rudeness. I hold my breath and wait, watching his face for some sign that everything will be okay. Or not okay.

Suddenly he grins, a grin that starts with his mouth and spreads to his nose and his eyes and his ears and probably even his fingers and toes and everything in between. He looks like a little boy on Christmas morning who realizes he's just gotten everything he's ever wished for.

I smile, too, and let my breath out.

He starts “Odhaja dan” again. I sing, too, but a little quieter this time. At the end of each line he stops and listens to me, shakes his head and grins.

And in this instant, I know that of all the things I could give him, this is the purest and sweetest of them all. He finally knows I really, really love his music, that somehow his music had gone all the way from Slovenia to Texas and touched someone who has no connection to anything Slovene except his music, and that his music was enough to make me come almost ten thousand miles to hear it from him in person.

Fort Worth, Texas