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# A Youth in St. Ivan[1]

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## Excerpts from Book One
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### Introduction

In her memoirs my mother writes about how and why we were forced to leave Trieste in 1919, after a combination of unfortunate circumstances and our own bungling caused us to lose the house in St. Ivan where we were born. I'll show the impact of that event on my subsequent development and choice of career in the final chapters of this memoir, but for now I would like to point out that my heart's longing for the place of my birth and the friends of my youth led me back to St. Ivan twice in the first years of my exile, when I visited the family of my uncle, the schoolteacher Anton Germek, over Christmas of 1919 and during summer vacation in 1923. In the autumn of 1926 I merely passed through Trieste on the way to my post-doctoral studies in Paris.

Immediately after the liberation in 1945 I had an opportunity to return to my birthplace. There was a great demand for educators in Trieste, where Fascism's twenty-five-year reign of terror had practically destroyed the once flourishing culture of the Triestine and Littoral Slovene communities, and there was a good deal of talk in Ljubljana about the possibility of my also going back to Trieste. I had recently been appointed secretary of the Slovene National Theater in Ljubljana and during that time I was frequently visited by friends and acquaintances who tried to persuade me to join the return to Trieste. To be frank, I was reluctant because I was afraid of meeting face to face with my own submerged youth. I was afraid of a face to face encounter with places and people who I had come to think and hope would remain buried forever in the furthest compartments, the most hidden recesses of my innermost self.

I returned to Trieste on May 4, 1946. In the next few pages I'll describe the events that led to that day, drawing on my diaries and notes from

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1 First published serially as *Mladost pri Svetem Ivanu* in *Primorski dnevnik* (Trieste) 1955–56; first Slovenian publication in book form: Ljubljana: Sanje, 2002–2006.

that time. At my place of work in Ljubljana I had had a trivial disagreement with the director. Even so, that conflict made my position at the National Theater untenable. The Minister of Education of the People's Republic of Slovenia at the time, Dr. Ferdo Kozak, had been wanting to set me up with a position that would be far more tranquil than the noise of the theater and would give me a chance to devote some time to my own literary and scholarly ambitions. At last I surprised him with my decision to go back to Trieste as part of the cultural reconstruction efforts.

During the year that led up to that decision something inside me had changed, without my being aware of it, in a process that ran parallel to the external shifts in my standing at the National Theater. That process ultimately led to my fateful decision to accept the invitation to go back to Trieste.

All my life, from earliest childhood on, dreams have exerted an important and often critical influence on my decisions, even the most crucial, life-altering ones. My waking, logical mind was often short-sighted, if not blind, compared to my instinctive, subconscious sense of the best course to take. That instinct, that subconscious sense expressed itself most readily and most often in dreams. Undoubtedly my observations of this and similar phenomena have made me predisposed to accept and support psychoanalysis, which in applying its particular method has discovered a hidden, systematic approach to interpreting dreams and exposing their underground roots.

Now that I've passed the half-century mark and my mother is long since in the grave, I don't exclude the possibility that it was from her I inherited this disposition toward being on intimate terms with my dreams. When I was little, it was always her dreams that warned her if one of her children or she herself was about to get sick. Certain symbols, for instance dreaming of beans or dirty water, would reveal to her eye and her waking consciousness the imperceptible signs and symptoms of an approaching illness. Nothing exceptional, really, much less miraculous. Just one more bit of evidence of how much more refined our instincts, our subconscious perception of the world is than our waking consciousness and logical thought.

This detour through the world of dreams strikes me as necessary for understanding this introduction. For it was dreams that first made me aware of the changes in my innermost self regarding the prospect of returning to Trieste, a step that was opposed by my fear of confronting the past and by my rational mind's focus on being responsible for my family and my literary career, which were both tied to Ljubljana.

In my diary for February 7, 1946, I recorded the following dream:

> *…Woke up from a marvelous dream that I can only recall in fragments. (Woke up again later, after a brief analysis, or rather a fantastic clarification of which way I should go…) I dreamed we were living back in our house in St. Ivan in Trieste.*

*It was after this war, I think Mašenka [my sister] had rented the house. We told each other we were going to stay in it forever, once Trieste finally got annexed to Yugoslavia. Dragica [my wife] and I came downstairs from the second floor to the room on the main floor where 'nonna' used to live. [This was an elderly woman whom we children called "nonna," who rented the main floor of the house with her husband, whom we called 'nonno.' 'Nonno' would carve wooden knives for me. Once I told him that I was going to go to my Kingdom of Adria, where I had whole piles of gold hidden away. When I came back to the house he came out to meet me, and when I brought stones I'd collected in the bib of my overalls instead of gold, he exclaimed in dismay, "That's not gold!"] In my dream there was a big stove in that room on the main floor. I notice that this big, old-fashioned, squat stove, which has a huge, flat surface on top of it, is lit and has a fire burning inside. I'm very surprised at this and am suddenly overcome with an indescribable joy. In my dream I say, "You know, I haven't been to downtown Trieste the whole time I've been back, I wouldn't recognize the streets or the buildings, but this [hearth] I know." I'm suffused [in the dream] with a boundless love for this house of ours, for the garden and yard, and only worry, but just a bit, that perhaps Mašenka isn't going to let me live here. But somehow I know that one day we're all going to buy the house back and that it will be ours again…*

A page or so after that I recall another dream:

*In 1942 I also dreamed that we were back in St. Ivan, walking through the Boschetto, then up the Hunter's Path.* [3] *So marvelous that tears were streaming down my cheeks [when I woke up]. At the time I was already dreaming of eventual liberation….*

[Here is some more detail from that dream: I dreamed that the war was over and that my sister Mašenka and I had returned to Trieste. Nothing was the way I expected it to be at that time (1942) in my waking state. We had been allowed to move back to Trieste, but the high school was German now and I was a teacher there. Besides my sister and myself, Dr. Rudolf Perhauc, my old homeroom teacher, was also employed there. I was disappointed that the liberation hadn't been complete, but when my sister and I walked up the Hunter's Path just above the Boschetto, I was so shaken, so

[3] Pot k Lovcu in Slovene, Viale al Cacciatore in Italian, a footpath leading from the historically Slovene neighborhoods of Vrdela and St. Ivan up into the wooded hillsides of the large city park known as Chiadino.

sweetly but achingly moved by the view out over our native haunts, that real tears streamed down my cheeks and woke me up.]

After a brief analysis of the first dream I noted a few pages further along in my diary:

> *I forgot to mention the most important part of the dream. - I seemed to wake up to find that I was happily back in our house in St. Ivan. I said to myself, 'So we really are back in St. Ivan! (And not just dreaming.) I haven't yet been in a single street, and yet I feel completely at home here. I'm going to stay here, and when Trieste is annexed, we'll move here for good.' My sense of uprootedness undoubtedly began with the loss of that house. My protests against my father - the sense of guilt - followed by punishment: a restless soul wandering from place to place looking for peace, but never finding it. - The great mysteries of the human heart.*

That's what my notes from February 7, 1946 say. From April 12 to 16 several other writers and I went on a reading tour of the Littoral, which at that point had not been annexed to Yugoslavia. I kept a detailed account of that tour in my diary. At the point where we visited St. Socerb, I wrote this:

> *Fantastic view out over Trieste, toward Istria and the sea. I'm seized with a huge longing for this place. I tell myself that as soon as possible I have to go 'home!'*

After that the events that led me back to Trieste took place in rapid succession. From Trieste my old friend Zorko Jelinčič wrote that people were expecting me and that I should come as soon as possible. I was let go from my job at the National Theater, I arranged my affairs, got my documents in order, and on May 4th I rode on an intercity bus through the checkpoint at Kozina, where I ran into two acquaintances who invited me to ride with them in their car into Trieste.

A few excerpts from my diaries will convey some of the feelings that came over me as I saw Trieste and St. Ivan, the place of my birth and childhood, for the first time in nearly twenty-five years:

> *Trieste, May 5, 1946. Strange, when I came from Paris or Belgrade back to Ljubljana I would always be nervous as I approached town and even as I began to make my way through it. Those nerves would evaporate as soon as I made contact with old friends. This went so far that I even felt nervous after a stay of any length in Kamnik or on coming back from a few days in the mountains.*

> *But when I saw Trieste as we drove along the serpentine road that leads down from Mount Split,*[4] *everything seemed so amazingly familiar, even intimately so, that there wasn't a trace of anxiety in my chest. We had minor car problems, and while the owner tended to them, the other fellow and I looked out at the city from just above St. Ivan. I saw the old and new churches of St. Ivan and felt boundless happiness at seeing them again after so many years…*

During my first days there, besides tending to my work obligations, I also had to adjust to my new circumstances. Every morning I told myself: today is the day I'm going to St. Ivan. But at first I didn't trust myself to make the trip on my own, because I was afraid the sight of the places where I grew up would overwhelm me. So I looked for somebody to go with me on that first outing. Everyone, however, was up to their ears in work and always had an excuse not to go.

But in my diary for May 10, 1946, I find this note:

> *…Toward evening on Monday I finally decided to go on my own. It was already past six, and I was back by 7:30. But what didn't I experience in barely more than an hour!*
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> *I got on the streetcar at the Chiozza stop. Even at first sight of the Public Gardens I felt a hint of some mysteriously sweet apprehension. Suddenly, for a split second, the curtain was pulled back from some dream that I'm not sure I ever recorded. But I had dreamed it for sure, and the sight of the gatekeeper's house next to the entrance retrieved it from memory for a moment. Something mysterious had taken place around that little structure, which in my dream was a big building, while the Public Gardens were so huge I could have got lost in them - a sign that whatever it was had impressed me when I was still very little and the gardens and buildings were gigantic by comparison. The streetcar pulled me along and the curtain closed on that flash of memory. For at the very next step it showed me the corner of a building where, as if at the press of a button on some mysterious mechanism, the curtain was drawn open again, revealing for just a fleeting instant the setting of some other long-submerged dream. As if blinded by the rapid succession of light and shadow, I kept looking in transfixed*

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[4] Razklani hrib in Slovene, Monte Spaccato in Italian - either "Mount Split" or "Cleft Mountain" would be likely equivalents in English - a wooded hill bounding Trieste on the northeast, leading up to the Karst plateau and so named because the rock quarry on its west flank, visible from Trieste, resembles a huge, barren gash on an otherwise green, wooded hillside.

*rapture to the right and the left, where the cross streets revealed themselves one after the other, each of them for the space of a heartbeat pulling the curtain aside from some long forgotten dream…*

*…The whole way, from the Public Gardens on, the streetcar made a horribly loud rumbling noise, so that I had to look several times to make sure we weren't going up some steep incline. I listened and listened to that strange, terrible pounding sound that seemed to increase from one stop to the next, and I looked in bafflement at the passengers around me who appeared to be having normal conversations with each other, despite the unnatural din. The closer we got to St. Ivan, the place of my birth and my earliest childhood, the more powerful the din at my feet grew and the more swiftly the curtains yanked aside at every turn, each time revealing some new scene, some new story from dreams that had long ago sunken into darkness. I felt a terror more monstrous than sweet at this, my first face to face encounter with the places and memories of my youth. My heart was gurgling in my throat and, looking back on it now, I suspect that the whole deafening clamor of that streetcar slowly making its way was just the loud beating of my heart, which acted as an amplifier to the noise the conveyance normally made….*

*… I saw the end of the Acquedotto, at the place where the steps lead down - another flash of light on a long-submerged bit of dream - and then we reached Školje, at the place where an ancient path leads up some steps, with the Dreher Brewery on the other side of the street - all of it the scene of countless dreams I'd had while in exile. At this point the memories, the flashes of dreams began firing like streamers from a skyrocket when it explodes. This point marked the furthest extent of my explorations as a small child, and now the flashes of memories and dreams went flying after each other in wild succession, like a fleeting hand grazing across the keyboard of a piano, the sounds following each other so quickly that they no longer cancel each other, but merge at the end in one single, mighty accord.*

*Suddenly: here was the start of the Old Road, San Cilino Street, where the house I was born in is. The flash of a dream - floodlit, then darkness. Wasn't this the setting of a dream I had yesterday? For a moment everything becomes clear to me, my dreams are so close I could take hold of them with my hand, but then they sink back into their mysterious locker.*

*My heart is pounding inside me like boulders being heaved around. A monstrously beautiful, horribly sweet sensation. Mother - birth - the great human mysteries.*

*Here is the coal shop, and there is the green grocer. Everything is the same as it was. And this spot right here was the setting of another recent dream. A flash of light reveals it for a hundredth of a second, before it plunges back into darkness.*

*There's the beginning of the Boschetto. It's gone now, cut down. This makes me so sad I could cry. Nothing more than a single row of sycamores from my childhood is left lining Black Street behind the olive oil store. When I was five or six years old, I discovered my first death's head moth on one of those sycamores. It was a little too high up for me to reach. I had to jump in order to lightly brush it off of the tree trunk. It made a chirping sound like a bat and I shook with excitement over my unexpected catch, melting in pure delight.*

*In the place where our "Earth" used to be there are buildings now. You can't see my birthplace from here anymore. At one time there was an open view down to the Boschetto from our house. Today it's obstructed by tall, nondescript apartment buildings. But the Ex Brocchetta tavern is still there. It used to be entwined by a rivulet that flowed down from the alley, but today has vanished who knows where under the streets and buildings. Carletto, a boy who lived down the street, called it the "patocco" and would argue with me about who borrowed the word from whom - the Slovenes or the Italians. And the 'Earth' - the wonderful scene of our childhood, full of mysterious surprises. It was overgrown with thistles, often had goats grazing on it, and every fall the goldfinches would arrive and take it over. Amongst ourselves we kids would call them gardelas, but only if mother wasn't around, strict language purist that she was. The neighborhood kids would try to catch them with limesticks. As for me, I couldn't begin to guess how many butterflies I caught in that field. Kids from the Fedrigovec settlement would come and pelt me with stones, the way they threw stones at a young artist who once came to paint their miserable little houses and yards. 'Carletto, butighe anche ti!'*[5] *some mother from Fedrigovec shouted at her son, who was lagging behind his stone-throwing peers. The painter fled the battlefield, leaving his palette, easel and mounted canvas behind… My mother, who observed this scene from our yard,*

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5 Carletto, you throw some, too! (Triestine Italian dialect).

*shouted out at the kids, "Vandali! Barbari!" But she was wasting her breath. The rascals just laughed at her as they walked past our yard on the way home from their glorious campaign.*

*On every side of the "Earth" there was a wall that was quite a bit lower on the street side than it was from the inside, where the field was. Once, when he was still quite little, my cousin Boris climbed up onto that wall from the street side. Then, suddenly, an enormous donkey's head appeared over the wall. For a moment the startled animal and the frightened child stared at each other eye to eye, before Boris shouted the only Italian word he knew, "Čerježe, čerježe, čerježe!*

*The streetcar makes a stop before Donatello Street. There are apartment buildings lining the street on the right and the left. Back when I was a child only the ones on the right were here. The middle building is where my first love used to live. My heart leaps and a terrible shadow flaps over me and passes. Shaken, I stare at the grave of my youth, my first real love. This is where my heart experienced its first great upheavals…*

Page after page, notebook by notebook, my notes from the earliest days of my return to Trieste for the first time in twenty-three years go on. Curtain after curtain is drawn aside before my startled but receptive eyes. The scenery is revealed as if floodlit by dozens and dozens of spotlights. Stories long forgotten, memories submerged in darkness rise up out of some terrible sleep of the dead and call out:

"Rescue us! Bring us to life. This is the last chance to summon us into the light, don't let us slide back into darkness, or this time we'll vanish once and for all."

So be it. Let's draw the curtain aside. Shine the spotlights into the darkness. Wake up the sleeping beauties and heroes. Fix the fleeting shadows in words before they slip irretrievably away. Dear friends and acquaintances of the first years of my youth! Permit me to raise your sunken childhoods out of oblivion along with my own. And those of you lying in the chill embrace of your graves, come up out of them and find your place in our circle. And all these new buildings that have since sprouted up in the pastures and fields where I once ran around with my friends and chased after butterflies, it's time for you to vanish from sight. You have no business in these memories. Others who come after me will write about and celebrate you. Mount Split! The setting of a thousand dreams I've had in exile. The mystery-filled mountain of my youth. The quarries have dug even more deeply into your flank and man has found new places to cut furrows into it. Old church of St. Ivan! Come, ring that sweet bell so I can hear it as I used to, on the eve of our patron

saint's day. First love, rise out of your grave and flourish again, etched into words. You violets under the shrubs on the far side of the church, let's have your scent, which used to start as early as February, when I would pick you for my birthday. Birth, human birth, that monstrous day of resurrection from the darkness of non-being. Come, let me unveil your mystery.

It's settled then: curtain… up!

# Book One
# A World of Magic and Fairy Tales

## Chapter One: Birth, Home, Parents

*I wailed and cried on the day I was born when I saw*
*the strange place where I landed: o, fallen from such*
*heights, banned from such bliss, now I wander*
*the world like a wretch*

Empedocles

### 1.

I was born on the 24th of February, 1903, on Shrove Tuesday in the evening. My mother, who gave birth to seven children, two of whom died in infancy, and who did not experience difficult births, often told me later what a passionate night that was. The weather was stormy and people in mardi gras costumes were whooping and hollering all through the streets while the contractions of childbirth shattered her nerves. When she saw me, my nonna —my mother's mother, whom I don't remember because she died later that same year—is supposed to have said to my mother, "That boy is going to have a lot to do with women."

A minor family dispute arose over the choice of a name for me. Mother, who was an ardent pan-Slavist and Russophile, was in favor of having me christened Vladimir. Nonna, who was a simple woman, wanted me to be named Joseph, while my father, who was deeply rooted in Slovene peasant tradition, was advocating for Ivan. Mother and father were both against nonna's choice. They were decidedly anti-Austrian and found repulsive even the thought of a name that would remind them of the Emperor Franz Josef. Mother was also against the name Ivan. She liked the name in its Slavic form, but in every official document the bureaucrats of old Austria would have renamed me Johann, and she thought that name was horrible. Mother's choice got reinforced by the godmother of all of us children, Miss Milka Mankoč, and when father turned out not to have anything against Vladimir, they took me to the new church of St. Ivan, where the priest, Father Franc Sila, who as a nationally conscious Slav made no objections when parents chose Slavic names, christened me Vladimir.

When they brought me home from the christening, nonna, who had been pretty passionate in her advocacy of Jožef, asked mother what they were going to call me at home, since Vla-di-mir was clearly much too long a name for everyday use. Mother, who was in love with everything Russian, told her,

"Volodya (pronounced Val*uod*ya). "Falot,[6] ja!" nonna burst out laughing mischievously.

The name a child is given at birth has a unique influence on his psychological development. Especially in early adolescence, the child feels inseparable from the name, tries to find out everything about it and what it means, and even does some experiments at renaming himself. The significance of a person's name, and especially a child's, has been wonderfully shown by Ivan Cankar in his short story "Polikarp." The protagonist Polikarp is the bastard son of an assistant parish priest, who christens the boy himself, deliberately inflicting that strange and shameful name reserved for illegitimate male children on him and sealing the boy's miserable fate to the day he dies as an old man.

I was quite happy with my name, even if I did rename myself now and then in my childhood daydreams. Mother's wish to call me Volodya never really caught on. At home I was called Vladi, and whenever mother found me to be ill-behaved, she called me Vladajs or Vladajso. My siblings would put me in my place by calling out, "Vladi! Mir!"[7], as though my name were telling me to keep quiet. Until father one day explained to me that in Russian the word "mir" had a second meaning that it lacked in Slovene: the world. That play of words[8] suited the young boy just fine and gave him plenty of material to fantasize about in his daydreams.

**2.**

I was born in the house of my mother on the Old Road, as we once called San Cilino Street, at number 65 Lower St. Ivan. At the time the house number was 465 Vrdela, Lower St. Ivan (Guardiella San Giovanni Inferiore). Particularly when we were little, mother was reluctant to talk about herself and her kin. As a result, I found out most of the things I was curious about as a child from my cousin Boris, who was a good year older than I was, but an early bloomer and hence physically several years ahead of me. Once he mentioned to me in passing that our deceased grandfather Štefan Nadlišek, who had been my mother's and his mother's father, had asked his two daughters what each of them wanted to be in her dowry: the family house and yard, or money, which would presumably come from the sale of the large parcel of ground below our yard. From other sources I heard that our grandfather's original intention had been to have a second house built on the parcel of land, but that he'd then had to sell it when the family's finances turned bad. I never heard anything more definite than that mother inherited the house and yard. She was the older of the two sisters.

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6 "A rascal – right!" falot (Slovene): scoundrel, rascal

7 "Vladi! Peace! (i.e., Shut up!)"

8 vladi - mir = rule the world

In her memoirs my mother recounts what the house was like before it was enlarged and a third story was added. The house struck my mother as ugly in its remodeled form, and she never really made her peace with it. I strongly suspect that in mourning the loss of the original house, my mother was actually mourning her own lost childhood, because we children thought that the house as we knew it was the finest and prettiest house that could be.

We children had never known the house in anything but its remodeled shape. At that time our only access to the house was from the Old Road through the front yard, which seemed enormous to us. After we sold the house in 1918 the new owners rebuilt it into a kind of villa with a new main entrance off of Donatello Street. In my childhood we were separated from that street by a wall that was quite high on the side of our yard, because the yard, and especially its lower terrace, which we called the "Field," were well below street level.

At one time our yard had been a large vineyard that descended in terraces, which the Karst Slovenes call "paštne" (though we children didn't know that term), from the Old Road down toward New Street (Viale Raffaele Sanzio) as far as the Boschetto. In my childhood there was still a remnant of that vineyard on the lower terrace of our yard, in the upper part of the "Field" that was just in front of our house's facade. But what a discovery it was for us children when once, amid the lush grass of the lower part of the "Field," my sister Mašenka found a nice, ripe cluster of grapes growing off the green shoot of the stump of a vine left over from the former vineyard! We children kept making discoveries like that, which for us were miraculous, for many years. Indeed, for us our yard was a kind of bottomless well of wondrous revelations that kept coming for as long as we had it.

Our yard, as I've described, descended in two terraces. On the upper terrace was our house, which had two acacia trees growing in front of it, one of which was especially lush and shaded almost half of the house. The front courtyard was extensive and strewn with sand from the seaside, while the walkways through the upper part of the yard were strewn with gravel. In front of the main entrance to the house there was a big trellis that was densely overgrown with wild vines. Under its shade there was an ancient stone table whose edges had been smoothed down by time. Alongside it there was a stone bench, with two wooden ones running perpendicular to it. Several stone steps led past the trellis down to the "field," where the remnant of the old vineyard was, along with several patches of dirt from which my father, who was hopeless at gardening, would eke out some green growth in his time off from work.

The largest part of the yard extended from the house along the Old Road in the direction of town. The upper terrace had two main paths with apple trees growing between them. At the foot of the yard was an ancient well that had dense lilac bushes growing several feet out from it in all directions.

In front of the lilacs there was some sort of dense, dark evergreen hedge. And across from the well was a good-sized shed which had several stone steps leading to it and yellow, white and pink wild roses growing all the way up one of its walls. In front of the shed there was a cluster of moss roses in the shape of a horseshoe.

A path running up from the well toward the Old Road led to the garden gate and the entrance to the house. At the upper end of the path there were two mighty chestnut trees, which we children would climb and sit in for hours on end, reading books or otherwise keeping busy. Next to the iron gate there was a beautiful, leafy young lime tree that was my particular favorite for climbing. Along both sides of the path there were low evergreen hedges.

Amid the lush grass of the lower terrace, at the lower end of the "Field," grew a considerable number of fruit trees of various kinds. Parallel to the low wall which formed the boundary of the upper terrace there was a row of pear trees, including some very fine winter varietals. These were "mother's" pear trees, but when the local delinquents began to trespass into our yard more and more frequently, picking the trees clean or pelting them with stones, father resorted to radical measures: to mother's great sorrow he chopped them all down. We children were especially fond of the big butter pear tree, which produced an early, juicy, sweet fruit and which stood out for me, because in addition to attracting my siblings and me and various holy terrors from the neighborhood, it was also visited by pretty red beetles that we called horned beetles.

There were three almond trees growing in the middle of the lower "Field." Two of them blossomed later, in the first half of February, while the third often came out as early as the end of January. Still another almond tree grew alongside the wire fence that separated us from the "Earth." The entire remaining lower part along the border toward Fedrigovec was covered with a veritable grove of greengage plum trees. Besides them there were some smaller pear trees and a young cherry tree. My sister Mašenka claims that, to her great sorrow, my cousin Boris and I cut it down one Sunday afternoon out of pure mean-spiritedness.

A bunch of fig trees that grew on the border between the upper and lower parts of the Field were a source of particular delight to mother, but also to us kids. In addition to them there was a big fig tree that grew in the far corner next to Donatello Street amid a thicket of lilacs. Mašenka once climbed it and suddenly came down having picked several ripe — plums! No one had noticed that tree until then, which had apparently been chopped down long before, though its stump had begun sending up new growth.

At the very bottom of the Field, just below the well, a black, desiccated tree jutted its branches like wild antlers into the sky. It had been a big acacia that dried up and died before I was born. Later father had it cut

down, but I mention it because it was the setting of a very significant childhood dream that I had and will speak more about later.

**3.**

Throughout my childhood the view from our house out over the Boschetto, the oil store with its tall chimney and the houses lining Black Street (Vrdela Street) that were inhabited by Slovenes remained entirely unobstructed. One of those buildings had a whitish, slanting chimney that played a special role in the years of our childhood. At the approach of St. Nicholas Eve, I would point that chimney out to my younger sister and both younger brothers as it shone iridescent in the twilight. "There's an angel hovering over there. See his white wings and his big loose sleeve over the roof of that building?" They believed me, or at least they said they did, because it was fun to believe in miraculous things. Just before we sold the house, in the final spring before the end of the First World War, I painted that scene in watercolors on the covers of one of my school notebooks. That picture shows the Boschetto, the oil store, the tall chimney, the building with the "angel's wing," the "Earth"—the big parcel of land with its thistles just down from our yard—and six bushy sycamore trees at its far end, running along New Street.

The parcel of land that occupied the space between our yard, Donatello Street, New Street (Viale Raffaele Sanzio), the garden of the Ex Brocchetta tavern and the Fedrigovec settlement, had once been the property of my grandfather Štefan Nadlišek and subsequently belonged to my aunt, my mother's sister, who was then forced to sell it. One winter we children were surprised by an unusual scene. One by one, little wagons carrying earth began trundling down Donatello Street, dumping their loads over the wall and onto the parcel. As I've said, like our Field, that parcel of land was also below street level, and what we were witnessing was the start of the process of raising it up by filling it in with earth. In this way the "commons" was to be made suitable for the construction of the new buildings that ultimately did sprout up on the left side of Donatello Street and along New Street, where you can see them today. We kids watched through the windows as countless little wagons kept bringing earth down to the former Nadlišek parcel, even as the burja raged outside, stirring up leaves, pieces of paper and hats, hurling them to all sides and up toward the Boschetto. That's when the parcel of land got renamed the "Earth"—we children renamed it that and that's how it remains in our memory to this day.

The "Earth" became mysterious and legendary among the five of us children in many respects. It was covered with tall, tassled grass, assorted weeds, here and there young acacias, various herbs and clover, and big-leaved coltsfoot, but most of all it was known for its three kinds of thistle, one of which was by far predominant and bloomed golden yellow, while the other varieties were more typical, with bright lilac flowers. People from Fedrigovec

and the owner of the Ex Brocchetta tavern would bring their donkeys and mules to the Earth to graze. We kids had no idea how to approach those animals, and we didn't. Father had a barbed wire fence run between our yard and the Earth, but the neighborhood kids soon managed to get its coils stuck together in many places, which left gaps through which they could get into our yard and my siblings and I could get through to the Earth. Our fear of the donkeys and mules was justified to a large extent. Once, I remember a mule seeing me enter the Earth through the fence and then chasing me back to the barbed wire, where I barely managed to squeeze through an opening back into our yard.

But the thistles didn't just serve as fodder for the donkeys and mules. Every fall their seed also lured flocks of goldfinches to pasture, where the neighborhood boys tried to catch them with limesticks. Later I'll have an occasion to say more about that.

As I've mentioned, at the far end of the Earth, practically abutting New Street, there were six majestic, leafy sycamores growing. Those sycamores were associated with a very particular memory from my childhood. On the Old Road side our house faced a hillside, and as a result it was protected from the burja, whose unbridled winter blasts would shoot high above the house straight into the Boschetto. We children would watch the trees on the near side of the Boschetto bending and breaking, while we played outside undisturbed in the quiet safety of our yard.

Then suddenly the crowns of the sycamores that grew on the Earth started to rustle. Their branches began to twist and snap, and at that point we children knew it was time for us to run inside. A blast of the burja had bounced off the Boschetto where it rose uphill toward the Hunter's Path, only to collide with the sycamores, which initially intercepted the blasts where they stood, some two hundred paces away from our house. But then, as more and more blasts kept driving into the Boschetto, bouncing off of it and colliding with the sycamores, some managed to slip through the trees and into our yard, where they began to collide with our house. By then we children were already watching from behind the safety of our windows, but we were upset at the burja for spoiling our games in the yard.

When I was still very little, I developed my own unique theory about our Karst burja. I had seen its effects first on the Boschetto, then on the Earth's sycamores, then finally on the yard outside our house. From all of that I drew the conclusion that it was the trees in the Boschetto that created the burja and that, as a consequence, they ought to be cut down. At one point I shared this discovery with my father, expressing my surprise that the Boschetto hadn't been cleared. I'm sure my father explained the real source of the burja to me then, but I doubt I was able to understand it at that age. I'm afraid that the subsequent occupiers of the Karst and the Boschetto were

coming from a similar childlike theory when they stripped both the Karst and the Boschetto so totally bare.

**4.**

Right next to the entrance to our yard from the Old Road there was another garden entrance that led down some narrow, dark steps past our evergreen hedge and our chestnut trees to the front yard and the house of our next-door neighbors. Their house was a kind of villa or even a small manor house built in the Secessionist style that was popular in Trieste at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Viewed from our perspective, this house and its front yard were even more deeply recessed than our "Field," while the far, sunny side of the house and its yard looked out toward the sea. But we children never got to see that side. We saw the house and its front yard, which was planted with several greengage plums and assorted other foliage, set in eternal twilight down there below us, and we were terrified of that grim place. We came up with a special name for it, too. We called it the Dog House, because the owner, a weekend hunter, had two mean, easily provoked hunting dogs that he took with him only on hunting days. The rest of the time they served as dangerous guard dogs and would charge at us barking furiously whenever we approached their yard at the far end of our Field. My sister Mašenka and I differ about the name of the owners of that house during our early childhood. She remembers them as the Zucchiatos, I say they were the Marpurgos, though I'm positive they were no relation to the pharmacist of the same name who owned the drugstore where mother would sometimes send us to buy medicine, and who was always nice to all of us and particularly generous with the candies.

The owners of the Dog House property had—I can't remember exactly—one or possibly two sons who were roughly my age. One of those boys had a pellet gun that he would use to shoot at the birds who flew from our yard into theirs, and occasionally he would even attack them as they perched on the trees in our yard that bordered on their front yard. We had no contact with that family. We weren't hostile toward each other, we just had no contact and lived completely separate lives. Much later, sometime before the First World War or maybe just as it was beginning, a new family moved into the Dog House, the Metlikovetzes, who had several children corresponding in age to us. We became fast friends with those children, and I'll have occasion later to write about them, their parents and their other relatives, but for now let me just mention that some distant reflections of those associations and contacts were later to find their distinctive way into Slovene literature.

Down from the Dog House and past the farthest extent of our Field the elevation of the land got even lower, marking the beginning, or rather, the end of the Fedrigovec settlement. It began at the corner formed by Julian

Street and the Old Road, and it comprised, as I suppose it comprises today, the entire complex of buildings between the end of Julian Street and the Old Road. If I'm not mistaken, when I was a boy there were some forty street addresses there, constituting a kind of working class neighborhood. The houses were small and some of them had tiny yards, but the folk that lived there, who had originally been Slovenes—what was left of the area's original market gardeners—began quickly to multiply when the Austrian authorities started to settle the "regnicoli" there, migrants who'd come from the kingdom next door in search of a living. Down from our Field and below Villa Dog House there was still a nice market garden with house, owned by Slovenes who later changed nationality, if I'm not mistaken, or possibly sold the property to non-Slovenes.

Our house and yard did not front directly onto the Old Road. Between the two there was a narrow strip of abandoned yard, at the end of which, right at the corner of the Old Road and Donatello Street, there was a tiny, little house, which in the course of my childhood gradually turned into ruins. I don't know if perhaps somebody still lived in it while I was an infant and toddler. Mother told us that its former owner had been a dancing instructor referred to as Goat, because he kept several goats in the yard. We kids liked to play hide and seek in the ruins of that house, climbing the walls, up into the chimneys and enjoying the scare that we'd get from the derelict building, which for us was teeming with secrets. During the years of my exile it was often the setting of dreams that I'd have, some of them nightmares. Once again, we kids came up with a special name for that strip of abandoned yard between our property and the Old Road. We called it the "Other Field."

As I've mentioned, the front of our house was turned toward the yard, the Earth, and the Boschetto. That's also where the front door and most of the windows were. On each floor there was also one window on the side of the house that was turned toward the sea. Out those windows we could see the garden gate and the fountain, part of the Old Road, and—something that Mašenka discovered relatively late—from the third-story window even the sea. Those side windows also gave a view onto part of the wooded grounds of the asylum, which we kids referred to as the "loonytarium."

Our house showed its back to the asylum and the Old Road as it runs alongside the high wall of the asylum grounds. That side of the house had neither windows nor vents. The asylum complex is extensive and seemed gigantic to us children. Its wooded grounds ascend up the hillside, dotted by a large number of buildings that, when I was a child, had frescoes painted on their walls. The colors of those frescoes—which, if I'm not mistaken, depicted in typical Secessionist style various scenes from antiquity—were originally quite vivid, but then faded with time. I don't know who told us children—perhaps one of the maids, or a schoolmate of Mašenka's—that it was dangerous to look up at them. Whoever looked at the frescoes went crazy

or died, the story went. I don't know to what extent my brothers and sisters observed that prohibition. I can say for myself that my eyes were always drawn to those frescoes and the asylum grounds, which we could see from our side windows or through the institution's imposing main gate, which has remained unchanged to this day, although it always gave me an eerie feeling to look at those buildings and grounds. I don't remember if I ever saw anything peculiar or ever experienced anything explicitly upsetting related to the asylum, which was so close to our house. But I was always overcome with a sense of dread whenever I had to walk down the Old Road past its imposing gate.

**5.**

As I've mentioned, at the time I was born our house already had three stories. There were stone steps leading from the main floor up to the second floor, and wooden stairs leading from the second floor up to the top floor, which had been added later.

On each floor—main, second and third—there were two rooms on either side of the staircase. An old couple whom we called "nonno" and "nonna" lived on the main floor, together with Justina, one of their many daughters, in the rooms to the left as you came in the front door. Mother rented the main floor kitchen and the abutting room out to them. Their kitchen had the kind of low, flat hearth that was typical of the Karst in those days, as my sister has a gift for recalling.

To the right of the stairs on the main floor was the "old kitchen," which was used for storing various unused rummage: crates, casks, suitcases, kitchenware, and so forth. The "old kitchen" served us children as a hiding place for our games and was continually the source of new and exciting discoveries. Against the wall across from the door it had a low, wide hearth. If I'm not mistaken, this was the old-fashioned Karst hearth with a chain for hanging a polenta pot over it, the "stove" that I saw in the dream I recorded on February 7th, 1946 and mentioned in the introduction. This hearth was also buried under all kinds of discarded odds and ends, empty, dust-covered bottles, stacks of old newspapers and similar junk. Hanging on a rope from the middle of the ceiling was father's bicycle, which was later to meet with a unique fate at the hands of my cousin Boris.

Access to the room next to the "old kitchen" had been built over from the inside. This room served as a shed, which we referred to it as the "stable," with the only access to it being from the outside. This is where father raised whole generations of rabbits. During the First World War we also kept several goats in the stable. Out in the yard on the Donatello Street side there was a big, old-fashioned chicken coop. I don't remember us ever keeping any

chickens in it. My sister Mašenka says that when we kids used the coop to play hide and seek, there were always more children in it than chickens.

As far back as I can remember, during my childhood there was an Italian family living on the second floor of our house. Their last name was Marini and they rented the entire second floor, consisting of a kitchen and three rooms. Mr. Marini was a low-level office worker, perhaps with Lloyd's, and a very polite, considerate man. My sister recalls that his wife would go down to the office every day, all made up and perfumed, to wait for him. They had several children, including a boy named Giorgetto, who was my age. Their daughter Rita was several years younger. Among the children was a boy named Menotti, also my age, who was actually the illegitimate child of Mrs. Marini's sister Bianca, who also lived with them. At that age I didn't understand the relationship, but to my horror I did notice that Menotti was always treated as inferior to Giorgetto and sometimes beaten for things Giorgetto did. I was eternally at war with both of those boys, and suffered my first injustices at their hands. Later I'll have occasion to show how that relationship exerted a fateful influence on my intellectual development and ultimately engendered several of my most characteristic literary works.

During those first years our family lived on the third floor. On the left side of the staircase there were two bedrooms, while to the right was the kitchen and, behind it, the children's room or, as we called it, the "back room." Later, about two years before the outbreak of the First World War, mother ended the Marini's lease, much to their disappointment. She had the entire house repainted and then we moved into the second story, while keeping both rooms on the left side of the third floor. The first of those top-floor rooms became our living room or "parlor," while the second became our parents' bedroom. The second floor had our kitchen and three bedrooms for us children.

From then on, the right-hand side of the third floor, consisting of the kitchen and one room, was rented out, first to a Friulian married couple, the Ferletiches, then after that to a young family called the Čoks (Zoch) with their little girl Renata, and finally, during the First World War, to the renowned schoolteacher Ivanka Sabadinova, who was a good friend of my mother's.

**6.**

As far back as I can remember, my most common image of my mother is of her endlessly kind, loving expression through her spectacles. She had exceptionally big, greenish eyes that were somewhat deep-set and dusky. Her expression usually conveyed a kind of sincere naivete, which everyone who knew her noticed. But whenever something upset, angered or pained her, her otherwise docile eyes were capable of flashes of lightning. Those eyes were never cold, however. The anger in them was always a kind of righteous

indignation, because she would only get upset over things that struck her as unjust, mean or vulgar.

There was something else characteristic of her face, namely, her full, finely shaped, incredibly expressive lips, which perhaps played an even bigger role in expressing her emotional states than her eyes, which were partially concealed behind her spectacles. On occasions when she thought she needed to seem angry at us children, she would try to send us the corresponding look through her glasses, but her lips betrayed the faint hint of a grin that we children referred to as "smiling through her mustache," though there was no trace of that on her face. Resistance to something, mild or extreme indignation, a happy or melancholy smile, anger, unease, determination, or contempt—all of these emotional states were expressed in the movements of her lips, as though they were a mirror reflecting her soul.

Her forehead was quite broad and, as a result, seemed to be relatively low. She had pronounced cheekbones and a strong chin, which lent her face a pentagonal shape. Hers was a markedly Slavic physiognomy, and she could just as easily have been from somewhere in Ukraine. She must have been unusually thin as a girl, with a waspish waist, as the photographs of her from those years reveal, and she was quite tall for a woman. After giving birth to her first children she became fuller-bodied, as her photographs attest and as I recall her from childhood. She never became fat or obese. Though seven childbirths may have robbed her of her former figure, she remained lithe and agile to the end of her days.

I can remember watching mother brush out her long hair, which reached down to her knees, and then put it up in two braids that she wore wrapped around her head. Mother's hair was unusually thick and she was proud of it. A few years ago (October 24, 1951), the schoolteacher Slava Pahor, who had been a pupil of mother's, shared a lovely recollection of those two long, dark braids in a piece that appeared in the *Littoral Daily*[9].

My mother begins her memoir *From My Life* with the rather pathetic statement, "I was born under an unlucky star…" Whoever knew her knows that for practically her whole life she considered herself to be unfortunate. At first it was her own person—her appearance—that she was dissatisfied with. She claimed she had an impossible nose that reminded her of the mantle over a stove. No one could persuade her that her nose was typically Slavic, indistinguishable from the noses of countless Russian and Ukrainian girls, even though she adored everything Slavic, and especially Russian. She told me that as a child she would get angry at what may well have been, at that age, her overly pronounced facial features, and that it hurt her deeply when

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9 *Primorski dnevnik*, the post-1945 Slovene-language daily newspaper of Trieste.

the neighborhood kids teased her with chants of, "Here comes the lion, here comes the lion!"

…

Most contemporary critics and theoreticians of literature, when assessing a writer or poet, look for the models who not only shaped them artistically, but passed on their world view and way of life. But influences and legacies like that are at best superficially valid, and mainly in the case of malleable, dependent personalities, at that. Usually a writer chooses the mentors who are already most congenial to his personality and disposition. Closer analysis tells us that an individual is *born* with whatever his life disposition will be. In her years at the teachers' college my mother's greatest enthusiasm was for Josip Stritar, who at the time was widely held to be the ultimate arbiter of Slovene literature. When she got to know Kersnik several years later, her enthusiasm shifted to realism, a choice that was particularly reinforced by her Russian models, primarily Tolstoy, whom she worshipped.

Janko Kersnik was both her model and her great, idealized love. Nevertheless, in her memoir she writes, "Kersnik advised me to write stories in which good was rewarded and evil was punished, along the lines that he pursued in his novels and tales. I boldly replied that in real life things usually happened the other way around, that wrongdoers thrive, while the good and innocent suffer…"

She admired realism and the realists, and as much a model as Kersnik may have been, she resisted idealizing or prettifying real life, the way he did in his literature. In principle she was a determined advocate of pure, authentic realism as she found it best practiced in the works of Tolstoy. Even so, her fundamental stance toward life was profoundly tragic, even if she wasn't completely aware of that fact. Long after she had seen through the sham of Stritar's "Weltschmerz" and left him behind in favor of realism, a pessimistic view of the world was still her overwhelmingly dominant mood. What for Josip Stritar had served above all as a literary and aesthetic pose—his Weltschmerz—was for my mother a cruel and unrelenting insight acquired through life experience. The only times in her life when she was truly happy, as she writes in her memoirs, were when she was attending the lectures of some of her professors at the teachers' college in Gorica, when her first works appeared in the *Bell* to great acclaim, when she was editing *The Slovene Woman*, and above all when she was exchanging letters and building her intellectual bond with the writer Janko Kersnik. Since she first wrote her memoirs in 1928 and then revised them in 1936, before dying on January 3, 1940, I should add my own observation that her last years—actually, her whole final decade and more, after she recovered from a rather severe nervous breakdown in the 1920s—were relatively cloudless. She took particular delight in the university lectures of Prof. Ivan Prijatelj, which she

attended over the course of several years and in which that great Slavicist of ours dealt with the "time of Kersnik." Among much else, her correspondence with Kersnik figured in those lectures, and suddenly she realized that her work hadn't been forgotten, the way she'd assumed it had been all those years since she'd got married. She also took great pleasure in the visits she got from young, hard-working women in Slavic studies, who interviewed her extensively about her work and her times. The preparation of an edition of her selected works was announced, which, sadly, has not been published to this day. Through it all, each of her five children got situated and all of them, except for me, had their own families. Her greatest remaining concerns focused on me and what outwardly may have appeared to be my unsettled, even reckless way of life. But ultimately she made her peace even with that and after so many years of misunderstandings Marica the writer and her son the writer finally found a common language.

Her alertness and her passionate interest in our literary scene never left her, not even when she had to spend a year in bed, with one leg immobilized by the illness that ended in her death. Whenever I came to visit, whether from Belgrade or Kamnik or even from close by in Ljubljana (since I'd moved out of the family house for good on completing my university degree), our conversations focused entirely on literature. She would tell me about her times and I would tell her about mine. In this way mother and son had found a way to connect, which I hope benefited both of them.

**7.**

…

Once, during my psychoanalytical period, I told my mother about how a woman had come to see me for advice on dealing with the severe problems she was having as a result of her constantly changing moods, which would swing from extremely pessimistic to extremely optimistic. I explained to the woman that these disruptions were caused by imbalances in her own physical and psychological makeup, showed her that the world itself was neither one thing nor the other, and after a brief analysis suggested a way she could get out of her crisis. Mother observed bitterly, implicitly referring to her husband, "I never had anyone who could explain that to me."

In a famous essay about Sigmund Freud, the writer Stefan Zweig characterized the time in which my mother got married (1899) as heavily freighted with lies and riven between a veneer of social niceties on the one hand and basic human instincts and forbidden desires on the other. It was the age of the *fin de siècle* and the Secession, about which I'll have occasion to speak more later. That age bore down heavily on women, who never dared to present themselves to men as they really were. Within society women were supposed to pretend to be perfect and didn't dare reveal any weaknesses to

men. In public life that age gave birth to the women's movement as a healthy reaction, which my mother joined in all her youthful fervor. To the world of science it gave Sigmund Freud, a physician determined to heal its moral and spiritual malaise, while it gave literature two great Scandinavians, Ibsen and Strindberg, each of whom tried in his own way to depict, analyze and find a solution to that morbid social condition.

…

As a militant feminist my mother was meanly attacked by the reactionary author and priest Dr. Anton Mahnič, whom she bravely took on in a vigorous published polemic. She was one of the first, if not *the* first critic to make the Slovene reading public aware of the exceptional talents of the young Ivan Cankar after the publication in 1899 of his early *Vignettes.* Despite that fact, she suffered a particularly ungentlemanly attack by Cankar, who as a man, alas, was a child of his time, and this pained her grievously. She forgave him, but she was never able to forget that attack. When Cankar came to Trieste to deliver his last lecture in 1918, half a year before his death, she sent me to attend the lecture, because she wanted me to go hear the greatest living Slovene writer, but she couldn't bring herself to attend. Later she told me that it would have been too painful for her to have to see him physically before her.

**8.**

The marriage to my father, followed by the births of seven children in fairly quick succession, brought an end to my mother's literary career. During the first years of their marriage she did manage to translate a few short stories by the Italian writer Antonio Fogazzaro for publication in the *Ljubljana Bell*, to continue writing for the Triestine Slovene daily *Unity*, and to submit a few scattered pieces for the *Little Bell* out of Ljubljana. But she had neither the time nor the energy to undertake any larger, original work of her own, once management of the household and child-rearing became primarily her responsibility.

But inside she remained sharply divided between her ideal, which for her meant her literature and her public work and her contacts with poets and writers, all of which had to be abandoned for the sake of home, husband and children, and the demands of a harsh, unyielding reality – which for her consisted of children, husband and household. We often caught her quietly crying while she was in the midst of cooking or washing dishes, and at least in our early childhood years, none of us had any sense of the fierce struggle that was taking place inside her. In fact, she lived a double life all that time: the life of her dreams and of the great, important engagement with literature and public life that she'd lost, and the little, everyday life that she actually

lived and that seemed insignificant to her by comparison. Thus, her own life's fate offered her vivid, irrefutable proof of how right her tragic, pessimistic view of the world was. Father's sobriety and disregard for women's involvement in public affairs and literature, which had its roots in his times and his peasant upbringing, only served to deepen her tragic sense of a lack of fulfillment.

By nature every child is essentially egocentric and selfish. It demands the full attention of its surroundings, particularly its parents, to its wishes and needs. We were no different. If we noticed that mother, who was a kind parent and a model housewife, was busy with something else that had no bearing on us, we tried at all costs to draw her attention away from it back to us and, if no other methods worked, we did it by misbehaving or going after each other. We may have had a big yard to play in, but despite that fact, we knew how to make enough noise and commotion to tear her away from her work and the daydreams that had nothing to do with us and force her to come reestablish order among us. Certainly that behavior only served to further fray her already oversensitive nerves.

She continued to subscribe to the *Ljubljana Bell* for many years. But once she was no longer writing for it, the new issues as they arrived would find their way, their pages uncut, to the bottom shelf of her library, which was quite extensive for those times. Later she told me how every new issue of the *Bell* that arrived was like a knife being stabbed in her heart. The unborn children of her imagination were rampaging and clamoring for attention inside her, demanding to be embodied in words. While she was dusting the rooms or washing the dishes, those unrealized characters would appear to her, and everything that came from outside was like a knife that just shredded her nerves and jabbed at her heart. Thus, observant readers of Slovene literature will not be surprised that her son the writer brought a two-fold experience to creating his short story, "The Unknown Factor," in which he depicts the horrified deathbed realizations of a frustrated artist, the unrealized characters and images of whose fantasy have remained trapped inside him due to unfavorable life circumstances.

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**10**.

Less than a year before she died, my mother shared much more with me about her parents and that side of the family. I diligently took notes of what she told me, which I would like to summarize here from my journal entry of June 14, 1939.

Her father Štefan Nadlišek, who by profession had initially been a self-taught land surveyor, but then, as of his sixty-first year, became a formally trained one, was originally from the Karst village of Katinara. He

lived in Kolonja for a time before moving to St Ivan when my mother was two years old. He told her that his parents had been so poor that, when it got cold, they used to cover him with a wooden board for kneading dough, because they couldn't afford blankets. He was an enthusiastic singer and, when mother was school age, he composed the lyrics to the song "My St. Ivan," which he commissioned the local organist to set to music. He was born in 1824 and died in 1897 at the age of seventy-three, the same age that his wife—my grandmother—and my mother were when they died. My mother, who had an aversion to keeping track of anniversaries, always thought he had died very young, until her sister Antonija Germek, my aunt, told her that he lived to the relatively ripe old age of seventy-three.

My grandfather had been one of the founders of *Unity*, the first Slovene daily newspaper in Trieste, and for twenty-three years he served on the Trieste city council representing St. Ivan. He would always show up at the council meetings—except during his final year—dressed in the local folk costume consisting of wide black trousers that reached just under the knee, white stockings and black shoes. The Italian kids would shout after him, "S'gor cons'glier! O s'longar le brage, o tagliar le gambe."[10] My mother, who in her youth was very sensitive and proud, persuaded him to set the folk costume aside during his last year on the council and have a pair of long trousers made. Even then she didn't have any appreciation for folkways and customs, because she had grown up with them and they made her feel self-conscious. As we spoke about it, she confessed that she regretted having pressured her father that way, because it was only with great reluctance and to please her that he parted with his holiday costume, which he had inherited from his father and grandfather.

He received two gold florins for every council session. He was hoping to celebrate twenty-five years of service on the council, for which he would have received a medal. But then Ivan Marija Vatovec beat him in the council elections by a marginal number of votes. This caused my grandfather to be very depressed. It was a severe blow for him, from which he never recovered to the day he died, especially since one of the biggest campaigners against him had been a relative.

I've mentioned that in her last years my mother discovered a late-blooming sense of humor. Several stories that she told me about my grandfather should be noted here.

By nature her father was, so she told me, an easily frightened person, while her mother had been the courageous one. One night, when he was

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[10] Councilman! Either lengthen your breeches or shorten your legs! (Triestine Italian dialect)

already in bed, he suddenly heard someone calling to him from beneath his window outside, "S'gor cons'glier! S'gor cons'glier! Bring me a towch!"

Nadlišek opened the window. Down below he saw a man who years before had killed another man in a gateway along the Old Road. The man had spent many years in prison for the crime and been released in just the past few days. Now he was afraid of walking home to Brandežija Street in the dark past the gate where he'd committed the murder.

But my nonno was even more scared of going outside in the dark to bring a torch to a man who had once killed another. So he sent his wife out to take the man his "towch." And indeed, nonna didn't hesitate for a second, she threw on her knitted *sciarpo* and took a "towch" out to the murderer, who then thanked her profusely for her kindness.

## Chapter Two: Earliest Memories

### 1.

I've mentioned that I was born on Shrove Tuesday, though I have no evidence that this fact in itself had any effect on me. What has influenced me my whole life long, however, is the fact that my mother later told me about it, that it was often mentioned within the family, and that even my cousins, aunts and uncles were aware of the fact.

"Vladi's put on a disguise. Vladi's making faces. Vladi's making fun, he's behaving like a mardi gras masquerader. It's all because he was born on Shrove Tuesday." "Of course, he was born on Shrove Tuesday, that's why he's this way or that." As far back as I can remember I was used to hearing statements like these. Not just my parents, but others as well would use them to explain various eccentricities of mine. Eventually I began to make use of it, too, if I felt I needed to make an excuse for some prank or oddity. In my autobiographical sketch titled "A Fever," I put the following words, which are genuine, in my mother's mouth:

"You have no idea what a wild imagination the poor thing has, even when he's healthy," Marija complained. "He sees spooks in broad daylight. How I suffered giving birth to him. Maybe that was the source of it all. Outside the burja was raging, it howled through our stove pipes like a banshee, and all the while I lay there helpless amid my contractions. It was night, and the whooping of the masqueraders mixed with the howl of the burja. It was Shrove Tuesday."

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**2.**

My earliest memory could be the recollection of a particular smell, the smell of lavender. Whenever I came across it as a child, my heart would be suffused with a feeling of comfort and warmth. As an adult living in Ljubljana and elsewhere in Europe I went for many long years without encountering that scent. It was only after returning to Trieste in 1946 that I discovered it again. I was walking from Barkovlje toward Kontovela along the same route that my mother had used as a young teacher some sixty years earlier to get to the school in Prosek where she taught. There are clumps of shrubs that grow atop the stone wall lining the road there and once, when I snapped a branch of one of them off, that warm, comforting feeling returned. I had picked up that old scent of lavender. Mother had told me that her mother, my nonna, used to put bunches of lavender in amongst her sheets and linens, so that she herself and everything around her smelled of it. My nonna died in November of the same year I was born (1903), and I was just nine months old at the time. This memory of the scent of lavender could be the only memory I have of her.

Beyond that there are some other distinct glimmers and flashes of memory that reach quite far back. Not long ago, as I stood bent over my younger son lying in his bassinet, with the shutters on the windows baffling the harsh light of the afternoon sun, the little boy smiled at me and began waving his tiny arms and legs so much that the bassinet started to rustle, and an age-old memory took shape inside me. Suddenly I saw myself lying just the same way in my own crib, with the endlessly kind face of my mother or father bent over me. I was surrounded by the same yellowish light. My mother and father have both always worn glasses and I liked to reach out and grab at them.

My father had dark hair and wore his mustache, which was golden with a tinge of red, with the ends curled up. I remember that I liked to grab at it, and that it was endlessly entertaining when father, holding me in his lap, would evade my grasp, pretending to be terribly afraid of me. In those years my father was plump and round-faced, and it always struck me as a child that there was something bearlike about him, perhaps also because he would tell me stories about bears and he did a wonderful imitation of a bear growling.

All around, we children thought father was a lot more fun than mother was. Looking back, I think my mother tried too hard to adhere to the rules of good parenting that she had picked up from books, while father was just himself with us, and to our great delight would often play with us, most often hide and seek. Mother had enough trouble with us all through the day to feel like playing with us, too, which is why she sometimes felt hurt when she saw how much we enjoyed playing with father when he came home for dinner after work, or from the café, and how impatient we got whenever he was away for too long. “Your papa has it easy,” she often told us. “He can spend his time at the café, then come home and play and have fun with you.

Then, after supper, he can march you all off to bed, while I have to spend my whole day worrying about you and managing the household, besides."

…

**7.**

Readers of these memoirs who know that their author's mother was a writer herself will probably be tempted to assume that she was the one who opened a window onto the world of fairy tales for her children, deprived as they were of both grandparents. But that's not how it was, except perhaps to a very limited extent. I've also consulted with my sister Mašenka about this, and her memory coincides with mine that it was our father who would enchant and transport us with all kinds of stories and tales.

In my mother's defense I should say that her vein of narrative creativity was undercut at its most productive moment. As a writer she was an adherent of realism and what interested her in narrative was not so much the world of magic and fairy tales as the life and society around her, and her own position between the two. She sought solutions to the dilemmas of individual human fates, of love between men and women, of marriage and career, but especially of the "woman question," or rather, the tragic situation of women, who at precisely that time were also beginning to assert themselves in our part of the Empire, becoming aware of their rights and equality and fighting for them. A child's world, the world of magic and fairy tales, was something remote and foreign to her at the time.

On the other hand father, or papa as we called him, was not just a passionate story teller, but also a remarkably skilled one, who I would say had an authentically creative imagination. He had within him the makings of a genuine teller of folk tales. In those years mother had no tolerance for anything that went beyond the bounds of real, everyday life, and least of all for tales of fantasy, which the world of fairy tales is filled with to overflowing. But father had a gift for imbuing stories and anecdotes from his own youth with fairy tale elements of the fantastic and magical.

The way he told his stories in his full-throated male voice made husky from smoking echoes in my ears to this day. Everything he told us about seemed to be set far away in some dim and distant past. He told his stories in a tone of perpetual amazement that he knew how to intensify and modulate in an endless variety of ways. For instance, if in the course of a story he said, "… And then, all of a sudden…," we children got the feeling that an abyss had just opened up ahead of us, out of which something strange and miraculous was about to appear. The word *witch* had something immediate, concrete and terrifying when he said it. He would imitate her screechy voice in a way that made us kids laugh and shrink back in fright all

at the same time. He could tell us about anything from the far-off past in equally vivid detail: witches, bears, stories from the Bible, or his own youth.

It was a regular holiday for us kids to crawl into bed with father on a Sunday morning in winter and get him to start telling his stories. The Karst burja would be howling through the stove pipes, the window panes would shake, and we would press close to father as he revealed worlds of fairy tales, magic and past splendor to us in a voice that was always amazed anew at these marvels.

"Papa, tell us the one about Jophes and his brothers," Mašenka pleaded. (That "Jophes" of Mašenka's made his way all through St. Ivan, thanks to the efforts of mother and the rest of us kids. I don't recall if mother "immortalized" him in *The Little Bell* the same way she immortalized the story of "How Our Mašenka Went Hunting for Birds." In any case, on my return to Trieste in 1946 I was moved and delighted to discover that "Jophes" was still alive and viral in St. Ivan after a good forty years.

Father would begin telling a story by setting it in the gray depths of ages long past, into which he would draw us along with him by depicting the characters and their dialogs as though they were taking place today, right here around us. Branko, the youngest of my parents' first cluster of three, was father's Benjamin, which provoked considerable jealousy in me, since I was older, and over time led me to pull a number of mean pranks. There was just as much or as little of the holy in father's stories from the Holy Bible as as there was in his tales about witches or stories from his youth. Everything he told us had the same fairy tale reality to it. His Absalom, whose hair gets caught in some branches as he races on his horse through the forest to escape his pursuers, was just as vivid as his own father was in his stories from when he was a boy, so that I instinctively grabbed at my own hair, feeling the pain in its roots when Absalom was left hanging by his in father's telling of the story.

Or when the witch's hand got trapped and the boy she was about to bake was saved, we laughed so hard as father imitated her wailing and moaning that tears ran down our faces. Or the boy who was always hungry - father would add, "just like our Branko here," making us feel so sorry for him when he had go without food for so long, that we probably would have fled from the room in order not to have to hear about the boy's suffering anymore, if not for the narrative skill and the magical aura with which father drew us along.

…

**8.**

When a fifty-year-old leans over the edge, as if looking over the wall of an amphitheater, and sees the wondrous variety and fairy tale riches of his youth down below, it genuinely becomes hard for him to decide where to reach first, what to give preference to in selecting.

My earliest memories also include the sense of jealousy I would feel when our parents tried to hide something from us children by speaking to each other in German, and the even more intense jealousy when mother and father went out somewhere in the evening. The two situations were frequently connected to each other.

At those times they would leave us with maids, of which we only had one at any given time for as long as we lived in Trieste, except during the last years of the First World War.

On those days mother would usually say a few words in German at dinner already. Most likely she was exhorting father to come home on time that evening, or to wait for her somewhere. I have the sense, though I could be wrong, that mother didn't mind occasionally seeing us get jealous when she went out somewhere in the evening. Father would have preferred to put us to bed early, but we could sense something was up and we weren't going to let ourselves be herded so easily. Even if we were already in bed, we would escape in our nightshirts and peer into our parents' bedroom or the kitchen, if they were still there.

At that time mother and father would go to the Russian Circle (or *Russkii kruzhok*, as it was called) or attend some event downtown at the Slovene National Hall, construction of which was completed when I was just over a year old. What that *kruzhok* that mother and father would talk about so often was all about, I had no idea at the time. I sensed it had to be something truly wonderful, but inaccessible and forbidden to children and thus very mysterious. I was jealous of the *kruzhok* and everything connected to it, jealous of Olga Nikolaevna, the representative of the Russian Consulate in Trieste who led the *kruzhok* and who was talked about a lot in our home. I was jealous of the names of all of the friends and acquaintances mother would mention, but whom I'd never met.

As a young woman mother maintained quite a fashionable, even elegant appearance. In those days she was quite shapely, yet with the help of a corset, which at the time was still worn by ladies, she managed to be quite narrow in the waist. She wore a gold-rimmed pince-nez attached to a chain, and for the theater she would add a lorgnette and a "spy-glass," a small pair of binoculars set in mother of pearl. Over her hat, which was adorned with a bird's feather or some artificial fruit, she had a *voile*, a veil dotted with tiny black birds that she would push up off of her face when she came to us children to say good-bye and kiss us good night.

By that time father was usually waiting impatiently at the front door. If the event didn't interest him, when they got to the National Hall he would veer off to its cafe and then mother would have to come get him. At least for the first few years they would go to the *kruzhok* together, and would also go to see stage plays and operettas together, especially when there were visiting theater companies on tour from Ljubljana. Because these events usually took place on Saturday evenings, they would often spend time discussing the performance the next day, on Sunday.

I think mother must have had a very good ear, because otherwise I'm sure she wouldn't have performed concert pieces as a soloist or in duets, most often with Josip Prunk, at local gatherings. She had quite a sonorous alto or mezzo-soprano singing voice, but around the house, when she would sing various arias from the operas and, most of all, operettas that were being performed in those days at the Slovene National Hall, her voice had a slightly unusual tinge, perhaps because she sang them with too much emotion and personal anguish.

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A unique and particularly close friendship bound my mother to the writer Zofka Kveder. Mother had great admiration for this friend and, I believe, secretly envied her for her bold, liberated, almost audaciously adventuresome life. From my earliest years I always associated the sound of her name with something dynamic, intrepid, untamable.

With respect to the way she lived, mother was the complete opposite: she endured the burden she had assumed, even though she moaned under its weight. Maybe this made her admire her friend Zofka all the more for the way she'd dared to blaze her own way through life in spite of the prejudices and obstacles society set in her way. As I've mentioned, mother was very vulnerable to the prejudices and narrow-mindedness that were widespread among residents of St. Ivan in those days. It was precisely on account of the tyranny of these prejudices and this narrow-mindedness, which mother condemned, but which was otherwise quite effective at making her feel powerless, that once, when Zofka came to visit in trousers and sporting a short haircut, mother asked if next time they could get together - downtown. Zofka was sensible and big-hearted enough to forgive mother this fear. They continued corresponding actively with each other until Zofka's tragic and premature death.

There is one other name I should mention while on the subject of mother's friends, one that played a distinct role in my childhood fantasies precisely as a name. I'm thinking of the poet Marica Strnad, who always signed her letters to mother as Marica II. This friend of my mother's took on a unique and courageous fate. As a young schoolteacher she had taught in

Styria, where she met a young assistant priest named Cizelj. They fell in love and fled over the Austrian border—to Russia. As best I can recall, this friend of mother's taught German in the city of Kishinev, and I think she became a widow quite young. From Russia Marica II sent my mother a photo of her son Kolya which hung on a wall in our house for many years. It was probably on account of that picture that I first heard from mother about this friend. After the First World War mother and son returned from Russia and settled in Styria. During his studies at the University of Ljubljana, Kolya lived for several years in my parents' house.

**11.**

Among my earliest memories are the dramatic effects of the burja that swept down from the Karst, the way it howled in our chimney and stove, the way it rattled the windows, and the view that we had through them onto our yard, the Earth and the Boschetto, with the trees writhing and breaking under its force.

Our house was not a particularly modern construction. The burja could always find holes and gaps through which to infiltrate the kitchen and bedrooms, and now and then it appeared in the form of less forceful drafts that, even so, pierced clear to the bone.

I can see myself sitting with my sister Mašenka in the "back room" next to the cast iron stove. The firewood in it crackles and sparks, while the burja howls through its chimney like a ravenous wolf. Each of us is holding a hard biscuit slathered in butter, but eating them is the last thing we want. Tears stream down our cheeks. Both of us are wearing a big bandage that covers the ears and head and is tied at the crown in a big bowknot that flops down like rabbit ears. We've come down with "orecchioni," or as father called it "the muffs," before mother corrected him, "Mumps, that's right, mumps." We children were often coming down with ear infections, most likely on account of the constant drafts in our house caused by the burja blowing through the cracks. The fact that I hear badly in my left ear is probably also the result of one of those childhood infections.

Every so often the pain would intensify. My sister and I competed to see which of us could wail more pitifully. "Oh, it hurts me so awful much!" Mother would then look in from the kitchen and try to calm us as best she knew how. Then as the pain subsided and we experienced the pleasant transition from a painful to a pain-free state, we could munch on our buttered biscuits again and from the warmth of our beds listen to the wild howls of the burja in the chimney and stove. The shutters clacked against the outside wall, to which they were fastened, and while mother continued fixing dinner, we got back to work, me to drawing or looking at picture books, and Mašenka to weighing and measuring the "fabrics" in her little "botega."

If Mašenka fell down or bumped into something, she'd go flying to mother, howling for all she was worth, "Acka pomba me, mommy," which was her way of asking for *acqua di piomba*, or leaden water, which at the time was applied to bruises and swellings.

…

**13.**

My mother used to tell us what good and obedient children we all were until we began going to school. At that point I particularly changed quite a bit, and most of all after I recovered from a bout with pneumonia in the first grade. Neither of our parents ever exerted any particular pressure on us while bringing us up. Father pretty much let us grow like the grass, or rather, the thistles on the commons, while mother tried to observe some childrearing guidelines that she'd picked up from books, every now and then adding some mixture of homemade preconceptions.

But there were certain things they were relentlessly strict about, most notably when it came to "bad words," which a child begins to pick up in passing from his less strictly raised peers as soon as he starts going to school. When we were still very little, we apparently knew just two bad words: *sciavo*[11] and *regnicolo*.[12] To these we eventually added a third: *renegato*, or renegade. What these words actually meant, we had no idea, and nobody ever explained them to us, or if they did, it went over our heads. As I already mentioned in chapter one, we had an Italian family renting a whole floor of our house, and they had two children—their own son Giorgietto, and her sister's son born out of wedlock, Menotti.

At first the children of the two families kept mostly to themselves. Both sets of parents saw to it that their children played on their own separate sides of the yard. But gradually we began to cross lines and play various children's games together. They understood no Slovene, and we knew no Italian. Every now and then a word would be spoken, and while they learned a few Slovene phrases, pretty soon we were chattering with them in their language. I would strike up a dialog, regardless of whether I was expressing myself correctly or not. The subject was usually who owned a particular item, a particular toy. We would bicker and fight over the tiniest things.

I have the sense it wasn't necessarily always my doing when an argument erupted. Perhaps the only systematic guidance our parents gave us, besides avoiding "bad words," was teaching us not to lie. As a result I could be very sensitive to the fact of somebody else not telling the truth or laying

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11 "slave," "Slav," or "Slovene" (northeastern Italian dialect, derogatory).

12 "migrant," literally, an Italian resettled in Austrian Trieste from the Kingdom of Italy.

claim to playthings by lying. This tension led to most of the fights between us, about which I'll have occasion to say more later.

When mother noticed that the children of both families had established contact with each other, she began to encourage Mašenka, who was silent when playing with them, to try to engage them in conversation, and since it was pointless to try to get them to learn Slovene, she began trying to speak to them in Italian.

Through the window one day she heard some noisy chatter in Italian. Some strangely familiar little voice was actively taking part in a conversation in Italian. She looked out the window and to her great surprise she discovered it was Mašenka speaking fluent Italian with her playmates, as though she were one of them. My sister had refused to open her mouth until she was absolutely certain that she had mastered the language on a par with our housemates. After that it was as though her tongue were fully primed and there was no stopping her.

Once when we were together in the back room Mašenka and I were bickering about something. One thing led to another and suddenly in her anger she let drop one of those "awful," "nasty words" that mother had warned us about. For an instant I was struck dumb with terror at my sister's daring, but then I noisily summoned mother and accused Mašenka in her presence.

"Mama, mama, I swear, Mašenka called me a very, very bad name."

Mother came into the room and, casting a harsh look at my sister, began questioning me.

"What did she call you?"

"One of those words that's so bad I can't say it aloud."

"In that case, say it very softly."

And because I still hesitated, she bent down to me and said, "All right, then just whisper it in my ear."

"You know what she called me? *Sciavo*!"

Mother made the sternest face she could muster, but even so it didn't escape me that she was grinning the tiniest bit "through her mustache." She scolded Mašenka and then explained to us that it was just as nasty for Italian children to call Slovenes "*sciavo*" as it was for Slovene children to call Italians "*regnicolo*." But that it was both nasty *and* silly for a sister to call her brother, or a brother his sister "*sciavo*."

**19.**

Once when I was about three years old, my mother dressed me up for "going out" and said, "Today we're going to go visit your papa at the office where he works." At first I vaguely took fright, because I was usually afraid of things I hadn't yet experienced, but then my curiosity prevailed. With great anticipation I took hold of my mother's hand and padded alongside her down to the streetcar stop at the corner of Julian Street and the Old Road. We rode along Carducci Street (formerly Via del Torrente) to the Slovene National Hall, where we got out, turned past the Center, and arrived at the square in front of the main post office building.

The post office was an imposing palace and I got goosebumps when I realized that this was where papa worked and we were going to visit him there. But something else attracted my attention before we got to the building: a fountain. In the midst of a huge round basin three naked giants stood bent under the weight of an enormous seashell that bore down on their muscular shoulders. Water came flowing over the edges of the seashell and shooting up out of countless tiny holes. In the middle of it, the mightiest stream of all shot up and scattered down to all sides in glorious cascades that glinted in the sun in all the colors of the rainbow.

Mother gave me time to take in the fountain, then drew me along behind her toward the entrance to the post office building.

When we went inside, with me wide-eyed at the sight of so much grandeur, we were approached by a gentleman resplendent in a blue uniform that was edged in gold at the cuffs and collar. On his head was a visored cap that was similarly edged in gold. He was holding a short stick that was decorated with gold and silver. It was evident that he immediately recognized mother and to my boundless amazement he accompanied us with the greatest solicitude to a stairway where he handed us off to a man in civilian dress, who showed us the same deference as he led us to father's office, announcing that here was the door "del signor capo d'ufficio."

Until then I had known father as papa, whom I loved inordinately, but whom I saw as more of a playmate and who sometimes even struck me as a little silly, especially when mother would scold him for smoking too much in the kitchen or the children's room, to which he would respond by singing a rather silly little song that I otherwise rather liked, "Tobacco is the sweetest herb, surpassing even honey…"

When I saw him here in this big, bright office, getting up from behind a desk stacked high with folders and dismissing the obsequious servant, I suddenly felt terribly shy of him. I hid behind mother's skirt, but she pulled me back to the front and said, "Say hi to your papa. Don't you recognize him? This is just papa."

Laughing, father pulled me out from my hiding place behind mother, took me up in his arms, and murmured something. I turned my head away from his face, because I felt so shy that I didn't for the world want to have to look him in the eye. He and mother exchanged a few words, then father set me down on the floor, went over to a cabinet, took a tall, ceremonial csako out of it and set it on his head. Mother liked jokes like that.

But though father seemed even more of a stranger to me now, I began to look at him with curiosity. Mother told him what an impression the doorman had made on me, much as she herself was always impressed by his imposing height, ramrod posture and livery. Then she asked him to show us the telephone exchange, which he was in charge of.

In a big long hall a whole row of young ladies were sitting with headphones on their ears. The ones who were free came and surrounded us, politely greeting mother and father and adopting me for a few minutes, passing me from one set of arms to the next.

I was awestruck and happy when, finally, mother and I left the telephone operators, father and the imposing post office building behind.

When mother and I finally arrived home and father joined us for dinner, I still felt shy around him for a while because of his importance, which I had sensed at his office. But that evening when he came home from the café, we were back to playing hide and seek, and father started humming and singing things as he always did, and all the grandeur of that morning was forgotten. But something stayed with me from that visit, namely, that father wasn't necessarily always and everywhere as silly and funny as he was at home.

If I think back and recall how many beautiful young ladies my father worked with day after day, it strikes me as almost strange that mother practically never felt jealous over him. If she did, then she certainly never showed it, except perhaps once when she took Mašenka and me into the city to see the mardi gras parade and told the two of us—as my sister recalls—to keep an eye out for father, in case he was out with some woman. In their younger years I suspect she couldn't imagine how father could enjoy spending hours each afternoon playing tarok or preferans with a bunch of other men, and perhaps she had her suspicions that he might be keeping some other itinerary. But father was totally satisfied with mother and their home and it would never have occurred to him to look at, much less go chasing after other women.

## Chapter Three: Holidays, Games, Old Customs

**1.**

While Upper St. Ivan retained its village character all through my youth, Lower St. Ivan was gradually being transformed into a suburb of Trieste. This was particularly noticeable just down from our property in the Fedrigovec settlement and farther down Julian Street. In its day St. Ivan with its outlying hamlets and settlements had stretched all the way to the Public Garden, which through the first half of the nineteenth century had been the park of a nunnery.

During my earliest years the major holidays were celebrated in an entirely different way than they are these days. While Christmas, Easter and St. Nicholas Day were celebrated more or less in keeping with customs accepted all through the Empire — even though the Christmas creches and Christ's tombs of Easter still bore distinctive touches unique to St. Ivan — there were two holidays in particular that were observed in elaborate and darkly powerful ways that clearly pointed to their pagan Slavic origins. I'm thinking here of the celebration of our patron St. Ivan and the burial and burning of Lent.

The best evidence for the complete otherness of these customs were the huge waves of residents of Trieste who would come out to St. Ivan on those days and watch in stunned silence the primordial expressions of popular merrymaking that sometimes escalated to explosions of outright demonic force.

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**2**.

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As far back as I can remember, midsummer night and the celebration of St. Ivan, the patron saint of our part of Trieste, figured as a major event in my life. "This was my holiday," as I might put it today. In fact it was a sort of celebration of young people, of youth, of growth, of merrymaking and the enjoyment of abundance. But everyone looked forward to it, from toddlers who had just barely left the cradle to little old women and feeble old men.

The day before the holiday, midsummer night, was a spectacle that stretched from St. Ivan and its immediate surroundings to hilltops and slopes ranging the entire length and breadth of the Karst plateau.

It began with the ringing of the small, high-pitched bells up in the tower of the old church on the Old Hill. At the flood of memories this brought, mother closed her eyes and listened. If we kids were making too much noise, she held up a hand to signal us to be quiet. Then we all listened together to

the gentle ringing, which was met at intervals by the lower-pitched bells of all the other churches, near and far. Mother knew all of the bells by their pitch and resonance. The closest and deepest was the bell of our new parish church of St. Ivan. Then a sort of rapid medley of peals began and mother would say, "That's from Katinara. That one is Ricmanje. Those are from Rocol. That's Trebče, and that one is Gropada." And on she went, identifying them all. Suddenly there were loud shouts from the yard, "They're lighting the bonfires! The bonfires are lit!"

But even before that, in the afternoon, we kids went first to the old church and then up the lower slope of Griža to pick flowers and sprigs of greenery. We picked flowering clematis and catkins that were as soft as down. We broke off blossoming branches of ash and picked "little roosters," as we called various species of sweet peas. For midsummer night we picked a variety particularly suited to making wreaths, with long, slender shoots that hug the ground and have gorgeous lilac clusters of blossoms. We picked yellow marguerites and white oxeye daisies, blue snowbells, sprigs of flowering thyme and all sorts of other flowers that are ubiquitous in our Karst. Loaded down with and arrayed in these finds we headed back home along with a pack of other children.

The girls set about making wreaths, and then we decorated the windows and all of the doors, and especially the garden gate facing onto the Old Road with flowers, sprigs of green and wreaths. Out of the "old kitchen" mother extracted some thin earthen jugs that were spattered with dried wax. We stuck candles into these, and if there weren't enough of these jugs, which dated to my nonna's time, we used bottles as candleholders. We then set all of these vessels with their candles on window ledges trimmed with greenery all through the house and as soon as it got dark enough, we lit them.

That was something to see! All of St. Ivan would glow in its festive illumination, decked out in wreaths and greenery. Everywhere you looked, on Vrdelca, up Brandežija Street, around the old church, up on the Hunter's Path, all over Griža Hill, on its slopes and right at the very top there were bonfires. You could see fires stretching from Katinara, past Bazovica, Padriče and Gropada all the way up to Opčine near the obelisk. Bonfires flared on the commons next to Suban, and they dotted the slope all the way down. Cannons were fired from the tops of the hills and from churchyards. Everything was aglow from the new parish church on Bala Square, in all the gardens and yards lining New Street, all the way down to the Earth and our yard. We kids collected fallen branches and kindling and lit our own bonfire down on the Earth where several other fires were already roaring, or closer to home in our Field. We took each other by the hand and danced in a circle around the fire. We shouted and laughed and howled and finally began to jump over the flames. At this point we were no longer suburban kids, we had become little pagans, as though some ancient tribal memory had awakened within us.

Every now and then someone would bring an armful of particularly combustible brushwood or a dried-out branch and wave it through the flames, causing sparks to fly all around, before heaving it into the fire with the rest of the fuel. The blaze would shoot skyward and then, as if crazed from all the dimwitted merrymaking, the more daring among us would leap over the fire, occasionally getting our trousers, breeches, or skirt scorched, even our eyebrows and hair.

Up above us on Donatello Street and farther down along New Street the residents of Trieste walked back and forth, their mouths gaping as they watched these spontaneous, primordial, wild outbursts of joy. The children our age from the big apartment buildings on Donatello Street, Italians and Germans, leaned over the stone wall above our yard and looked on in distant amazement, even horror, as we rampaged out of our minds. They never came down to join us.

Father and mother had long since begun trying to round us up for bed, but we refused to be herded. Once our fires began to sputter out on the Earth and the Field, we looked up toward the nearby hilltops, where the bonfires blazed on. We could see the tiny shadows of people as they kept dragging more branches and logs to heave onto the fires. Fanned by occasional gusts of wind, they would shoot tongues of flame high in the air, swarms of sparks spraying out from their tips in all directions each time. In the fires' glow we could see the black shadows dashing in wild, enormous leaps through and over the flames. No longer the eve of a Christian holiday, this was the revelry of ancient generations of pagan Slavs.

Late at night the bonfires began to subside. Tired at last from all our excitement and jumping around, we gradually let ourselves be sent off to bed. But I at least had a hard time going to sleep even then. In my drowsiness I kept seeing images of the bonfires, the billowing sparks, and amid the glow the dark shadows of people flinging themselves through burgeoning flames.

**3.**

The first Sunday after midsummer night was the procession of St. Ivan. It was semi-obligatory for school-aged children, but we never took active part in it and were just spectators, instead, which seemed like a nicer and more interesting way to be involved, both to us and our parents.

Again we decorated our doors and the garden gate with flowers, greenery, and blossoming branches—the garden gate only in my earliest childhood, when the route of the procession still led down from the church along the Old Road, until, after reaching the entrance to the Boschetto, it turned back along Vrdela Street toward the Rotonda, thus making a loop all around Lower St. Ivan. We children felt a great loss when the procession stopped going past our house and our garden gate, all decked out in flowers,

greenery and branches that "nonno" had chopped for us somewhere in the Boschetto or on Griža.

That was the only day of the year when there was an early morning mass at the old church. We would get reports that the area around the little shrine was teeming with people. The old church had room inside for just a handful of St. Ivan's adorants.

For mother and us children the celebration of our patron saint was closely linked to a type of flower that we planted alongside our garden wall and at the edges of our garden patches each year. I'm thinking here of geraniums, which sometimes grew to the height of a grown person. We had several varieties of them: white, light pink, lilac and red. Their stems and leaves were covered with a kind of down, as were their buds and seed clusters. They were fuzzy all over, as we kids used to say.

These flowers had a place particularly close to my heart. Just as the violets that grew behind the old church and higher up on Griža were my harbingers of spring, I saw in the budding of the geraniums, which shot up quickly out of the dirt, the promise of summer and the holiday that ushered it in, midsummer night. Ever since, wherever and whenever I've encountered these flowers, the sight of them has moved me, sometimes profoundly, because I've seen a part of my early childhood embodied in them.

I've already described how, during my childhood, we had an elderly couple living in the ground floor of our house, whom we called nonno and nonna, just as their real grandchildren did, who often came out with their parents to visit them. They had an unmarried daughter named Justina living with them, whom they called Giustina, although both of the parents were solidly Slovene. As I recall, this nonna taught Mašenka and other girls who lived in our neighborhood how to make wreaths. Nonno and I developed a unique friendship, which I'll talk about in more detail later.

I was five or maybe a bit younger when I first began to collect butterflies under father's tutelage. Actually, Mašenka, who was two grades ahead of me in school, began collecting them at the same time with me. Father took a box that was left over from some pastry we'd bought and glued bits of cork onto its inside bottom. Then he devised several "stakes" for mounting our butterflies, which were primitive implements: into a more or less smooth, sufficiently thick plank he carved out a trough roughly the size of an average butterfly's body. In our earliest years we killed the butterflies by "crushing their heads," though in fact it was the thorax. If we caught a bigger, stronger or fatter butterfly, a sphinx or a tiger moth, we would ask father to perform the executioner's task for us. Then we would pierce the butterfly's thorax with a needle and secure its outstretched wings with pins. As soon as we thought it had "hardened" enough, we took it off of the stake and mounted in the box by affixing its pin to one of the pieces of cork there.

There will be an occasion later for me to describe how much joy, but also how much psychological agony I got from collecting butterflies and, later, insects that we would dip into "spirit." Here I've mentioned just enough to make sense of an incident that pointed to some age-old custom associated with the celebration of midsummer night.

When I was five, on the day leading into midsummer night I caught, or rather discovered an enormous moth clinging to the trunk of one of our apple trees. There was no picture of this butterfly in the copy of *The Slovene Lepidopterist* that father had bought for me. Father thought it was some kind of deformed death's head moth, but when we visited the Museum of Natural History soon afterward, I saw in their collection a similar one that was identified with the Latin name *Sphinx convolvuli* or, more commonly, hawk-moth.

This moth, which flies only in the evening and early nighttime, let me lift it off of the tree trunk without any struggle. To tell the truth, when I noticed the gray bulge on the tree bark with the unmistakable shape of a moth at rest, the unprecedented excitement of it took my breath away. As if protecting myself from possible disappointment, at first I refused to believe that it was a real, live moth. But after my initial excitement subsided, I took a closer look at the insect. On its back it had a kind of insignium that really did resemble a death's head, except that this pattern wasn't pale yellow against a pitch-black background, as it is with a real death's head. It was etched in black against a gray background and decorated with some light blue and white raised surfaces. Its wings were elongated and blackish gray, with many lighter or darker designs.

When I took it off the tree trunk, I went flying toward the house, shouting loudly and eager to show it to mother and anyone else who might want to look at it. Nonno came out of the house to meet me and when I showed him the butterfly, he suddenly recoiled, then started reaching his hand out to take it away from me.

"That's a witch, it's a witch, not a butterfly!" he shouted, trying to knock the creature out of my hands. The old man was somewhat worn down and rather stiff, so it was easy for me to elude him.

"What do you mean, a witch?" I shouted at him, as all the blood rushed to my face in anger and resentment. "This is a butterfly, a nighttime one, a moth, you ought to know that, nonno. It isn't a witch! Word of honor, this is the most beautiful butterfly I've ever seen."

"Throw it down on the ground so I can kill it, the witch!" nonno shouted. "It's got venom and it's going to bite you!"

He refused to let me go inside the house to see mother, whom I kept calling to come out and explain to nonno that this was just an innocent moth, not a venomous witch.

"Ah, right, a moth," nonno sneered at me. "You'll see if it's a moth or a witch when it bites you. Oh boy, it's bonfire eve and a whole pack of them are gettin' ready to descend onto Griža. Tonight they'll be everywhere and they're goin' to blow all your rabbits and bunnies away. Give it here, so I can nail it up over the door to the stable. My father and grandfather would always nail a witch or a habirdamouse (half-bird, half-mouse - i.e., a bat) up over our barn door, so the other witches wouldn't dare go inside and bite the animals."

Finally mother arrived and when she saw that I had a big moth in my hands, she decided I could take it upstairs to my room or the kitchen until father got home from work. Nonno kept on grumbling to himself about witches and what sharp, big teeth they had tucked away, and how it was going to bite me if I carried it in my hands. Mother reassured him with her tongue in her cheek, and I don't exclude the possibility that this was the first time I heard the story of how witches plagued her father, my real nonno, and yanked at his hair that time he was coming home on the Hunter's Path late at night from serving as godfather in Katinara. In any event, this false nonno kept insisting that he had to nail the witch to the stable door and threatened to come get it at night when I was asleep. I begged mother not to let nonno into my room, and it wasn't until father got home and determined it was just some kind of deformed death's head moth, but a moth in any event, and promised to mount it for my collection that I relaxed and let them tuck me into bed.

**14.**

My mother wasn't a particular supporter of the institution of preschool. She was convinced that all children really needed was their own yard and a bunch of playmates, and that in preschool children picked up bad habits and naughty words, as well as an illness or two, or at the very least lice, which in those days were not uncommon among schoolchildren. Mašenka was never sent to preschool, even though mother's sister, Antonija Germek, had been running one successfully for years. Mother had some kind of prejudice against the whole concept, so it was only with great reluctance that she ultimately decided, I'm not sure why, to send me. With time she overcame her prejudice and sent all of our younger siblings—Branko, Ksenija and Nenad—to preschool.

I can't recall if I attended preschool for a full year or if it was less. The first time mother walked me there and then came back to walk me home when the first day's instruction was over. After that our maid walked me there

a few times until I could be trusted to walk the whole "long" way down the Old Road past the church and then around to our aunt's preschool.

"Dozy doats!" all of the voices answered at once.

That song, which we were supposed to sing standing in a circle as we made gestures corresponding to the words, was everyone's favorite, even though many of us, myself included, didn't quite understand the words.

"Dozy doats and marezy doats and little lamzy divy… "

I no longer remember which of my later schoolmates I got to know in preschool. I do know that both grades—our aunt had one or two assistants working for her—were packed full, although the *Lega nazionale* that was founded just about then was already reaching its talons out for Slovene children. We learned how to sing songs, such as "A Little Boat Plies the Waves," "Come, Highlander," and others like them, to recite poems, to count, and of course to play all sorts of games with blocks, tiles and similar items.

Besides the songs that we learned to sing together, for the end of the school year my aunt and her assistants taught us children to recite individual poems which we were meant to perform at the closing ceremony. I must have somehow stood out in recitation for my aunt to choose me to recite the poem "Marko the Hero."

The day of the ceremony and my first public performance arrived. Mother dressed me up in my sailor's suit and either walked me by herself or with someone else to the preschool. My aunt gathered us together behind an improvised stage, giving us encouragement and providing final instructions for how to comport ourselves.

I was one of the first children up. There may have been some little girl before me, who undoubtedly did a splendid job. My aunt drew the curtain aside and pushed me out onto the stage. When I saw the sea of faces and eyes, all trained on me and expectant, I immediately wanted out and ran back, but auntie was waiting for me there, crouching and with her arms stretched out, as though she were intercepting some frightened chicken, and she tried to encourage me to go back. When I managed to slip past her arm, she grabbed hold of me and shoved me back onstage.

Terrified, I took only a few steps from the "hole" in the curtain and opened my mouth. My aunt called out to me in a stage whisper to move closer to the center of the stage. I didn't quite understand, though perhaps I took another step or two downstage and began reciting my "Marko the Hero."

But, oh no! No matter how much I opened my mouth, not a sound would come out.

"Louder, louder!" I could hear auntie whispering from behind the curtain. "Louder, louder," I could hear from the audience.

I felt my mouth was opening as wide as it would go. Auntie was whispering my lines from backstage so loudly that some in the audience began to giggle. I tried to pick up her words and then, all of a sudden, on top of everything else, the text disappeared from my memory. And still there wasn't a sound out of my mouth.

Suddenly a wave of laughter from the audience engulfed me. After it came another, and another. As I looked out at the auditorium, it was as though I were staring into an open maw that was going to swallow me whole any instant.

And indeed, in another moment that grinning maw snapped at me. Growing louder and louder, the laughter reached its merciless tentacles out for me. Then, amid the laughter, somebody began to clap. Others joined in the applause and suddenly I sensed the fathomless shame I had stumbled into. With all the precision of my nerve endings I grasped that the whole auditorium was jeering at me and that their applause was for entertaining them with the desperate, soundless opening and closing of my mouth.

I spun around on my heels and, like a wounded bird, shot off straight into the curtain. My aunt's compassionate arms embraced me there. She asked me, partly scolding and partly grinning good-naturedly, why I hadn't been able to get a word out, when I had recited the poem so well in school. Somebody, I didn't see who, said, "Poor boy shat his pants." That expression struck me as incredibly ugly and hurtful, and it has remained in my memory ever since, precisely the way it was spoken at the time.

The laughter and applause that accompanied my flight from the stage continued to ring in my ears for a long time afterward. I saw them as marks of my shame and they would come back to haunt me in nightmares. How I got home afterward and whether I participated in the children's choir that day, I can no longer recall. Nor do I know what mother or Mašenka or our maid or any other family or relatives who may have been present at my humiliation may have said. For a long time after that, it infuriated me when anyone tried in jest or gentle ribbing to remind me of my first great defeat in life. If it was an adult, I would fling myself to the floor in agony and shame. If it was another child, even if they were older than me, a boy or a girl, I would ram my head into their stomach. Perhaps because I never forgot that first great defeat, it never managed to develop into the harmful complex that it otherwise might have done. I do believe that a large part of the stage fright that public appearances cause me derives from that early experience, although I also see it as evidence that public speaking is not very compatible with my nature. In any event, that first experience indelibly taught me the lesson that it's never a safe bet for me to speak in public without a written text in hand.

I don't suppose I need particularly to stress the fact that teams of horses wouldn't have been able to drag me back for a second year of preschool.

**22.**

One of the biggest, most amazing discoveries a child makes is the fact that the world didn't come into being with him. That the sun, moon and stars existed before him and that the world wasn't created just for him. That his parents were once children themselves, and that the whole world around him, including himself, is constantly changing.

Which is why a child loves to hear stories about what it was like back before he existed. And precisely for that reason fairy tales could be a collective memory of ancient times, when people didn't have writing and stories were passed on from one generation to the next, changing in the process or acquiring some new conclusion thanks to the genius of a particular narrator or the collective genius of the tribe.

If a person lives uninterruptedly in a particular environment, he doesn't notice the gradual changes around him, just as he doesn't perceive himself aging. It's only the big revolutions and leaps, whether in an environment, a community, or an individual, that lend themselves to being noticed, because the change is so great. You can also see a difference if you compress a longer period and compare it to an earlier one. But changes are most noticeable if you've been away from a place for a long time or you run into an old friend after many years.

This is why I felt like a stranger in strange surroundings when I went back to Trieste in 1946 and visited St. Ivan after either twenty-three or twenty-six years, depending on the count, as witness one episode that I jotted down on December 1, 1946. "Before I came home to write today (Sunday), I took the trolley to (the upper part) of "New Street" to visit my old paths leading up the side of Mount Split… When I came back down I got on the streetcar as it waited next to the new church. A young couple, a typical working class Triestine dressed in his Sunday finest with his girlfriend, were already sitting in it. Then another young man, also working class, took the seat across from him. They spoke Italian to each other, although you could tell particularly from the girl's appearance—the characteristic slightly upturned nose and the high cheekbones—that she was a typical local. At last they were joined by another young woman. Both girls kept looking at me, the boys as well. Then the first girl began softly singing a popular tune (I can't swear to the accuracy of the lyrics): 'Io t'ho incontrata a Napoli…' The others joined in and while the streetcar was still standing, they began singing it louder, casting me mischievous looks all the time. Then something occurred to me. My black goatee had tricked them into assuming that I, a native born

St. Ivanian, was from Naples. To check whether I had guessed right, I pulled my copy of the Slovene *Littoral Daily* out of my coat pocket, and slowly, deliberately opened it up and began to read. Suddenly they fell silent, exchanged looks, and began quietly giggling and elbowing each other. I however, unflappable, kept reading the newspaper I'd already read, as though nothing had happened."

Just as in 1946 I no longer recognized the former St. Ivan of my youth, so did what Négode and my mother talked about from the old days of St. Ivan, which I so much enjoyed listening to, seem like some fairy tale to me.

During my mother's childhood - she was nine years younger than Négode - almost all of the wives and girls of St. Ivan were still washerwomen who did the laundry for the ladies of Trieste. There was no making a living off of market gardens and small vineyards. The men did seasonal migrant labor - mostly splitting stones on roads under construction - while the women supplemented the family income by doing laundry. They chose this employment because St. Ivan had the most abundant running water. Women throughout the district of St. Ivan all the way up to Vrdelica took in laundry, which they would trundle down to the Patocco at a point where it was known as the Tuljevec, which is where the May 1st Stadium is today.

Just as young people everywhere have a knack for making work fun, the laundry ritual had a particular charm and allure for the girls of St. Ivan, much as corn husking does in other parts of Slovenia.

The girls did their laundering only on Mondays and only at night. They boiled the laundry in big kettles and had to "spark" three times in the process. The boys arrived around eleven o'clock to join them in "sparking," a term that was used to mean courting. There was plenty of time for it, because the girls did laundry the whole night through, from Monday evening until early morning on Tuesday.

While the women and girls of St. Ivan worked as laundresses, the "scarpers" or scarp dwellers from the villages of Ščednja, Dolina and Boršt were cooks or bakers who would load their baked goods onto donkeys to bring down to sell in the city, which in Négode's youth had no bakeries of its own.

In those days the only bread known and baked in St. Ivan was made from buckwheat flour, and even for big, traditional weddings buckwheat cakes were the best pastry they were able to produce.

The women of Barkovlje were known as the "flower ladies." They grew roses, carnations, hyacinths, tulips and other kinds of flowers in their ingeniously designed, meticulously maintained gardens and would bring these in wicker baskets to market in Trieste.

Milk was brought into town by the women of Bazovica, Padriče and Gropada, who would come down the Old Road past our garden gate swaying slowly from side to side as they rode on their donkeys, which were weighed down with big cans of milk. In this regard I remember a detail my mother told me.

Her half-brother Lovrenc would hide behind the garden gate every morning, waiting for the milkmaids to ride past on their donkeys. Once the procession arrived, he would dash out of his hiding place and, one after the other, shove them off of the donkeys. He explained to the family that he did this out of pity for the poor, overburdened animals. He had a point, without any question. But mother thought the real reason he did it was because he was a ruffian and out of control.

## Chapter Four: The Treasure of Mount Split - and Its Elf

### 1.

Up to this point in my narrative I've presented some fragments of memories retained from my earliest years. I've tried to fill in the gaps between those fragments with an account of the life and customs of St. Ivan at the time, with recollections of some of the personalities that played a significant role in those early years, and with digressions on various "antiquities" dating to the years before my birth, but that I heard tell of at the time. It has seemed worthwhile to me to recall those customs, events and circumstances, both as a way of evoking that lost world for my fellow Triestines, and to present mainland Slovenes with a good-sized slice of the national experience that has been more or less terra incognita for them. I also believe that this documented excursus into our past can not only serve as a key to my own literary endeavors amid the greater Slovene public, but also facilitate a better understanding of the work of a good many other Triestine Slovene writers.

My memories from the age of six on are much denser and more complete. On February 24, 1909, when I turned six, with my sister Mašenka already attending second grade at the public school of St. Ivan, my parents began getting me used to the idea that beginning in the fall I would start going to the "big" school, as we referred to elementary school to distinguish it from preschool, which we called the "little" school.

Frankly, I was none too enthusiastic about the loss of freedom looming ahead, of which I was all too aware. I had watched Mašenka having to get up early each morning, even in the cold of winter with the burja raging, and head off to school. While I was free to play out in the yard or draw and build things as I felt like it, she had to do her homework. My sister was a model pupil and her teacher, Miss Sabadinova, praised her profusely to

mother, who, having herself been an ambitious child, was proud of her daughter and began holding her up to me as an example. But at one point I resolved to myself that this was not for me, and that beyond fulfilling the basic requirements, at all costs I was going to retain as much of my precious freedom as possible so I could continue gulping it down.

Even before I started going to school, I had the habit, especially on sunny spring, summer or fall days, of getting up very early. Ever since my baby's dress was exchanged for shorts, I put my clothes on by myself. Mother would then tie an apron on me similiar to the ones worn by tailors, which for that reason we called a "šeštarček." Sometimes, especially in summer, I was the first one up in the house and then the first to go out in the yard. I would hop and jump down the stairs and out in the yard, all the time singing to myself, and I recall father once saying, "Vladi is like a little bird. At the first glimmer of light he's up and singing to himself." My brother Branko was three years younger than me and slept a lot in those years. Father assumed Branko had some nervous condition that required him to sleep more, so he was especially solicitous of him, and whenever he saw me getting jealous of the special treatment Branko was getting, he would say that parents had to take extra care with the weakest children. Fortunately it turned out that father's concern was unnecessary, for Branko grew up and out and by sixteen was the tallest and strongest child in the family. Today I think that his body needed all that extra sleep to get ready for its later growth.

Sunny mornings like those remain in my memory as some of the happiest and most beautiful days of my life. There I was, all by myself in the garden of the universe. Even the streets were practically deserted of people. I felt like a king enjoying his domain. Small birds would hop back and forth among the branches of the plum trees. I would listen to the song of nightingales, the chirping of robins, the twitter of sparrows, the cawing of crows and the warble of titmice. I would watch the gold-crested wrens darting from one bush to the other. I hadn't yet been consumed with a passion for collecting, though I did have a net and caught some butterflies. But if any of them were injured or useless for my collection, I would let them go.

…

**2.**

On warm days like those I was usually long since up and out in the yard by the time Mašenka came out of the house with her schoolbag in hand. As she walked past, I felt as though a cloud were passing over the sun and remembered that the end of my freedom was coming up soon. She seemed to be carried away with her own young book-learning, which held little appeal for me.

Though I often swung back and forth on the garden gate, which was made of thin iron rods, I would be careful to get well out of the way before she got that far. Experience had taught me that my cheek exerted some magnetic force on her hand, so that I became intimately familiar with the pontifical slap long before I knew what confirmation was.

For our house was under "feminine rule," as the saying went. Mother usually had the last word. Father wasn't at home enough, and when he was, he wisely chose to avoid family arguments. It was only when mother's word wasn't enough, or when we kids got too obnoxious that she would invoke father's name or, if he was at home, summon him as the enforcer. I have to admit that in those cases, which were rare, for the most part, father's word did the job.

Mother spent her whole day taking care of and getting angry at us, and perhaps that's why we didn't take her chiding and threats too much to heart. As the oldest child, Mašenka occupied a unique position. At least to us it seemed like she looked down her nose at us, and if she went past, it was as in Baudelaire's "Don Juan in Hell"—she would act as though she didn't even notice we were there.

This must have been very convenient for her. If one of us forced her to deal with him, and particularly if we contradicted her in some way, her arm would shoot out like a flash and not exactly stroke his cheek. As a youth, if I ever got in too heated an argument with a girl, I would make sure my face was protected. On occasion this provoked laughter, even my own, because I was thoroughly aware of the source of my instinct for maintaining a respectful distance when contradicting a woman.

But in my sister's defense I should relate yet another incident from the same year that reinforced my belief that it doesn't pay to pick bones with women and girls. Once near the Church of St. Ivan I came across a little girl who was exactly my age whom I'd noticed numerous times before because her plump cheeks, lively little eyes and especially her braids, which were all coiled up around each ear, strongly appealed to me. It was for those coils around her ears that I secretly gave her the name "Earsy," and because if I smiled at her, she smiled back, I assumed that the attraction was mutual. I don't know what demon provoked me that day to go up to her and reach my hand out to touch her braids, while pronouncing the name I had privately taken to calling her, "Earsy, Earsy, Earsy!"

Whack! came the hand right over my ear. Startled, I stared at her face that was flushed all red and her eyes glaring with rage. In later childhood, whenever I ran into that girl, the blood would shoot to my face and I felt hopelessly ashamed, even though I knew the girl had misunderstood my attempt to make contact.

Eventually the girl vanished from my world. But almost forty years later, on January 27, 1947, I recorded this in my diary:

> *Now that the concierge's daughter, who got married last summer, is expecting a baby, we have a new maid in the building. The sight of her instantly conjured up a distant memory: the same plump cheeks, the same prominent cheekbones and the same almost greedily rapid speech…" (Here I recount the childhood incident I've just described.) "I asked her where she was from. 'St. Ivan,' she replied. 'What year were you born?' '1903.' 'Did you also live in St. Ivan?' 'All my life, from the time I was born.' This afternoon I jokingly shared my memory with her. She looked at me frightened, as though I were blaming her. She didn't understand. She confirmed that she had worn her braids wrapped around her ears as a girl. I don't know if it's her or not. Still, I wished I could have given her a big hug - on account of that memory, which is just as dear to me as everything else, good or bad, that I experienced in childhood.*

I don't rule out the possibility that now and then I may actually have earned one of Mašenka's slaps. Regardless, I thought my sister was wonderful. Our visitors admired her soft, velvety brown eyes which they would compare with a doe's, as well as her cleverness, provided they could get her to say anything. I admired her most of all because she had a whole bunch of schoolmates with fabulous names about whom she would tell wonderful stories. I don't recall ever being angry at her for more than a few minutes after she subjected me to one of her surprise pre-confirmation attacks…

**5.**

I've described how wonderful my life was in the spring and summer of that last year when I didn't yet have to go to school and I could spend the early morning hours out alone among the flowers and plants, the ripening fruit, the chirping birds and the fluttering butterflies, like a king amid his vast gardens. I would walk around from one end of the yard to the other, skippinb and singing songs to myself, watching the birds take flight, boundlessly happy in my complete and utter freedom.

Once my sister had left for school and father for work, once nonno looked out into the yard, followed shortly after by nonna, who would take a seat on the stone bench in front of the house to comb her long, thinning gray hair, I was suddenly in the midst of my more or less pleasant, everyday reality.

In the meantime mother would dress Branko and Ksenija, and if I hadn't had breakfast yet, she would call me back into the house so we could have breakfast together. Our cat Gobo would pad in from somewhere, tabby gray with dark stripes, still bleary-eyed, and arch his back until I ran my hand over it two or three times.

Little Renata Zoch would come out into the yard, followed by the Marinis' girl Rita, and the two of them would start playing with Ksenija. Branko would come attach himself to me and follow me on my treks through the yard. Down on the Earth and all along the walls surrounding the yard, kids from Fedrigovec would gather and watch while we played, every now and then taking a shot at us with some bit of gravel. At that time the constant guerilla war that we eventually fell into with the boys from Fedrigovec was still a number of years off.

Giorgetto and Menotti, whom their mother or aunt would take now and then to the Public Garden or some other playground, especially later, came out and joined us, too. We didn't always get along very well. As a child I tended to be more passive than enterprising and didn't take to competitive activities. But Giorgetto, whose personality was very different from mine, often forced me into them.

Two incidents involving those boys impressed themselves fatefully on my memory.

One morning the four of us were out on our rounds of the yard, Giorgetto and I as the bigger boys in front, with the smaller boys Branko and Menotti behind us. Earlier that morning I had already taken a walk through the yard, but then the flower that Giorgetto and I now simultaneously noticed probably hadn't yet opened up, or else I most certainly would have noticed it and probably picked it. It was a beautiful, big bindweed blossom, a kind that fades quickly once it's been plucked.

As we walked shoulder to shoulder we noticed it practically at the same time, or perhaps I saw it just a fraction of a second before he did, because I reached it before he did and plucked it.

"Lascialo!" Giorgetto shrieked as he lunged at me, trying to grab the flower out of my hands. "Mi lo go visto per primo!"[13]

I raised the flower as high up over my head as I could.

"Bugiardo! Se te lo gavessi visto ti per primo, te lo tenesti ti adesso in man."[14]

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13 Give it here! I saw it first. (Triestine Italian dialect).

14 Dummy. If you'd seen it first, you'd be the one holding it now. (Triestine Italian dialect).

He flung himself at me and we struggled for a moment before he managed to rip the flower out of my hands, crush it, throw it on the ground and stomp on it

All the blood rushed to my face, but Giorgetto jumped away, picked up a sharp, flat stone and hit me in the foot with it. I was barefoot and it sliced clean through my left little toe, leaving it hanging limply from my foot by a tag of skin and flesh. He ran off at that point, followed by Menotti.

I burst into tears and Branko ran to tell mother what had happened. She came and got me and took me into the house and, after stopping to scold Mrs. Marini, who wasn't at fault for anything, led me up to our apartment on the third floor. There she sat me down and put my foot in a wash bowl filled with water.

I could hear Giorgetto crying not very convincingly from the next floor down and the voice of Mrs. Marini as she slapped at his apron, leading mother to say, "Go ahead and shout 'ciò, ciò, ciò per un'altra volta,'[15] we know you're just dusting the boy's apron off."

The bowl of water turned a thick bloody red, which made me howl even worse when I saw it. But I distinctly remember that it wasn't because it hurt that much. It almost didn't hurt at all, and though mother thought they were going to have to sew my toe back onto my foot, after a few days of being bandaged, it grew back on by itself.

The thing that affected and pained me the most about this entire incident was Giorgetto's wild determination to crush the flower and throw it away rather than let me have it, even though by rights it was mine, because I got to it first and plucked it.

**6.**

His behavior on another occasion troubled me even more.

One beautiful, sunny morning we children were out playing in front of the house. At that time a trellis still covered a large part of the yard. I was by myself making sand cakes, scraping away the mortar and just generally immersed in playtime activities. The girls were quite a ways off to one side, playing with their dolls. Giorgetto and Menotti, both of them active and restless and "inseparable enemies," were chasing and shoving each other all through the yard.

I write that they were inseparable enemies, which was true. However, in some way the younger and smaller of the two, Menotti, adored his cousin, whom everyone in their family doted on, even his aunt, the

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[15] Take that, and that, and that! (Triestine Italian dialect).

unfortunate Menotti's own mother. To a family like ours, which tried to realize full equality and the greatest possible justice for all of its members, this was completely incomprehensible.

Giorgetto observed his parents mistreating his cousin in every possible way, so he started mistreating him, too: denigrating him, calling him names, even beating him.

That morning a noisy argument between the two boys suddenly jolted me out of my concentration on what I was playing with. What they were arguing about, I don't know, and perhaps I didn't even know at the time, because I'd been so preoccupied until that moment. I looked up. With eyes flashing with hatred and rage, Giorgetto was glaring at Menotti, calling him one bad name after the other. Frightened, but protesting, Menotti was slowly but steadily backing away from him.

Suddenly Giorgetto dashed over to the wall, which had several thin iron slats on it that father had set out for some purpose or other, and grabbed one of them. With all the strength that his small size allowed and his fury made possible, he lifted the slat up over his head. I can see him now, waving the iron slat threateningly.

I jumped up and shouted at him, "No, Giorgetto, no!"[16]

Instinctively Menotti raised his hands over his head in self-defense precisely at the instant when the slat came crashing down onto his upraised hands and his head. Menotti howled and fell to the ground.

Giorgetto instantly dropped the piece of iron and ran up the steps straight into the house. As he headed up the stairs I could hear him shouting at the top of his lungs, "Mama, mama! Vladi ga colpito Menotti con un ferro per la testa!"[17]

Menotti picked himself up off the ground. I was standing beside him. I may or may not have helped him get up.

Giorgetto's mother and aunt came flying out of the house like two furies. I don't recall if they slapped me or pulled me by the hair.

I clearly recall my sense of horror at the monstrosity of the lie and the injustice.

But I didn't give in. I felt all the blood rush to my face.

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**16** Italian.

17 Mama, mama, Vladi hit Menotti in the head with a piece of iron! (Triestine Italian dialect).

"No lo go colpito mi," I loudly defended myself from the accusation. "Ze sta Giorgetto. Lui lo ga colpito."[18]

At that point my mother arrived.

They told her that I had struck Menotti on the head with an iron rod.

"It's not true! True to God and word of honor - Giorgetto hit him. I was making cakes when the two of them started to fight. I even told Giorgetto not to hit him."

"Ze stato lui. Lui!"[19] Giorgetto shouted, pointing his finger at me. I sensed he was already jeering at me.

"Dizi, che no ze vero!" I called on Menotti to witness. "Dizi la verità, che ze Giorgetto e no mi."[20]

My mother then asked Menotti, "Non abbi paura. Dizi la verità: Ze stato Vladi o Giorgetto de colpirti?"[21]

Menotti, who had gradually stopped howling, looked first at Giorgetto, then at me, then at his mother and aunt.

Giorgetto shrieked at him now, "Dizi, che no son stato mi, che te ga colpito Vladi!"[22]

Mother and Menotti's aunt also intervened at this point, "Dizi, chi ze stà: o Vladi o Giorgetto?"[23]

Once again Menotti looked first at me, then at Giorgetto. I could see the threatening look his half-brother gave him. But still he wouldn't say anything.

That's when a barrage of questions and threats came raining down on him. Giorgetto kept shouting that he had to say it was me, while my mother and his aunt asked him outright if it was me. I was shouting at him, too, saying he should tell the truth.

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18 I wasn't the one who hit him. It was Giorgetto. He hit him. (Triestine Italian dialect).

19 It was him. Him! (Triestine Italian dialect).

20 Tell them that isn't the truth. Tell the truth, that it was Giorgetto and not me. (Triestine Italian dialect).

21 Don't be afraid. Tell the truth. Was it Vladi or Giorgetto who hit you? (Triestine Italian dialect).

22 Say that it wasn't me. Say that it was Vladi who hit you." (Triestine Italian dialect).

23 Tell us who it was, Vladi or Giorgetto? (Triestine Italian dialect).

There was a brief silence and then Giorgetto's mother asked in a hard, merciless tone, "Ze stato Vladi?"[24]

Menotti looked around frightened and then finally nodded.

I thought my heart was going to explode with pain. It seemed impossible that heaven hadn't collapsed and the earth was still standing and the sun kept shining on as before. I cried, wailed and screamed that it wasn't true.

Menotti's mother remained silent while Giorgetto's mother began screaching at my mother something to the effect that she knew what kind of people we were and that when her husband got home they would have a thing or two to tell her.

Mother said nothing and just took me by the hand and led me back into the house. In the kitchen she asked me again if it hadn't been me after all. When I managed to stop crying enough to say something, I recounted the entire course of events for her once more

"Vladi, look me in the eye," she said.

I looked her in the eye.

"I believe you," she answered. "Still, in order to keep the peace, you need to stay indoors for the rest of the day."

I don't know if the truth ever came out in the Marini family, and I don't remember how our parents settled the matter. I think that incident was the reason we weren't allowed to play with them anymore. My memory of that family and their kids goes completely blank after that incident. I always thought they must have moved out of the house after that, and I never again ran into the boys or no longer recognized them if I did. To my surprise, I recently received confirmation from Mašenka that the Marinis stayed in the house until about 1912. I think she must be mistaken. Both incidents, particularly the later one, were indelibly stamped on my memory. They even had the positive effect of inspiring some of my writing—unconsciously, to be sure—but today, more than forty years after they happened, I've at last managed to pull those hidden roots into the light of day.

**7.**

Let's return to this event, which I recovered from long ago, but which has nevertheless cost me considerable pain to write about here. Even though I had done nothing wrong, I had to spend the rest of the day crying indoors, while the other kids got to play outside in the sun. Gradually, though, the pain

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[24] Was it Vladi? (Triestine Italian dialect).

subsided. Today, when I look back on it with the eyes of a person who has some experience with child psychology, I have to say that Giorgetto's reaction of displacing the guilt for something he had done onto me was the unpremeditated response of a clever boy acting in self-defense to avoid punishment. (I'll have an occasion in this memoir to confess some guilt of my own, which though it may not outwardly appear quite as drastic, was still psychologically related.) I also don't exclude the possibility that at some point I may have behaved badly toward the boys and that Giorgetto's accusation and Menotti's concealment consequently got reinforced by a desire for revenge, the opportunity for which offered itself out of thin air. But in any case, the main reason Menotti concealed the real culprit was his fear of what Giorgetto might do to him in revenge.

Now, as I write this, I can see Giorgetto's and Menotti's faces just as they were at the time when all of this happened. Giorgetto was a delicately featured blond with white skin that had a pink hue to it. His hair was cut in a "frou-frou," and his big, bright eyes were framed under highly arched brows. He was quick to anger, and at those times his lips would compress in a straight line while his eyes flashed like some feral cat's. Menotti had dark hair and brown eyes and was somewhat smaller than Giorgetto and me. He was a browbeaten child who had the habit of ducking his head whenever anyone raised their voice, and he clung to Giorgetto like a tick, even when the other boy treated him like dirt.

I couldn't grasp their behavior in the incident I've described. We were fundamentally different children, with different upbringings, habits and languages. I have the sense that in contrast to them my siblings and I were quite tame, good-tempered, light-hearted and fun-loving. I have no recollection of either boy ever smiling. Particularly Giorgetto was harsh, abrupt and readily angered. Menotti imitated him in every respect.

I've mentioned the extreme sensitivity that found its expression in the way I would involuntarily, instinctively begin to empathize with what others were feeling. Just as when somebody cut or jabbed or otherwise injured himself, I would almost instantly feel the same pain in my own body, I also had some innate instinct for emotionally experiencing the motivations that led one or another of my peers to commit some act or other by identifying myself in some sense with them. Giorgetto's and Menotti's actions had left me horrified and I tried to shake the experience off at all costs. As a child I was neither vengeful nor particularly resentful of others. But in my consciousness from that day on a black curtain of oblivion fell over both of those boys and everything connected to them, except that those two events and the perpetrators connected to them remained alive to me as a child. Both must have kept drilling away in some hidden depths within me. Giorgetto's and Menotti's personalities were clamoring for some explanation, their actions for some key to their motives. Until some twenty years later, in

connection with a number of other experiences and personalities from my youth, all of it took shape, quite unconsciously and in different circumstances, in a literary work, a "renaissance tale" bearing the title *Don Lorenzo*, which to this day remains one of the most incomprehensible and, alas, least understood works of Slovene literature. The protagonist Don Lorenzo embodies many of the traits that as a child I had perceived in Giorgetto. Today I suspect that all that time Giorgetto's personality was continuing to take shape unconsciously inside me like some sort of alien body. Then, following certain fateful encounters that I had during my time in Paris, and thanks to my growing familiarity with historical personalities from the Renaissance, which in a moment's insight inspired the setting, it coalesced in a unique character that demanded I give it literary form.

At the time *Don Lorenzo* was written, I was only dimly aware that it had some connection to some specific personality from my childhood, to Giorgetto. Where the name Lorenzo came from, I didn't know at the time. I only knew that it wasn't inspired by the Lorenzo known as "il Magnifico." I had completely forgotten about mother's half-brother Lovrenc. The names and, to some extent, even the characters of Lorenzo's two servants were inspired by two of my dearest friends from my adolescent years. Just that much for now. But I should add that the process of identifying with another that would normally take place in an instant for me, in this particular instance took almost twenty years to be realized, this time in the form of a distinct work of literature.