

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

LADO KRALJ
RIEN NE VA PLUS

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Lado Kralj: Rien Ne Va Plus

Which number? That is not such a simple choice. There are days when I wake up convinced that I like at least three – and anyone can see how dangerous that can become. Amateurs think it isn't that tricky – picking a winning number at roulette. Your date of birth for example; I was born on March 27th, which mother told me was Palm Sunday. So 27 is my lucky number. Then, March being the third month, there are the options of adding or subtracting 3 and you get 30 or 24. Or you can divide by 3 and get 9. Now you have to decide between 27, 30, 24 and 9. This method is frequently used, but I must say it is far too mechanical, quite dumb in fact. In serious play, things are different. Of course you can still start with your date of birth. Then you must allow all the dust inside you to settle, not think about it at all. Then somewhere deep down inside you 27 yields two other numbers, 17 and 29, for example. Both are related to 27, yet are something completely separate; that is clear, isn't it? Just the fact that we now suddenly have two prime numbers means we are dealing with quite a different class of material! Then I slowly, without any need to rush whatsoever – it can take a week or even a whole month – choose between 17 and 29. Looking at their position on the layout I immediately notice they are both in the centre and not somewhere near the margin. This is important since, when I feel luck is about to strike, I have a habit of sticking chips on all the fields surrounding the lucky number. Everyone says then: "Look over there, it's Kontler the subscription salesman, at it again; he seems to be doing well, let's hope he'll have something left to take home and not lose the lot by the end of the evening as usual!"

It isn't all just about money, it truly isn't. Though I am constantly short of it and it feels like I have to work more and more to get less and less. Being a subscription salesman means that you look for buyers in their work places, hanging around offices, clinics and kindergartens, trying to persuade the employees to place an advance order for Pellaprat's cookbook or some junior encyclopaedia and pay you a twenty percent advance in cash. They say all work is honourable and this is no rocket science, but sometimes it is tough as hell. Despite this - it isn't just about money. It is true that, were I to win, I mean hit the jackpot at roulette, I would solve my financial troubles for a while. But it is also about how you get the money. Either you slog your guts out like some manual worker or you calculate something, make an ingenious move, invest your assets with all the risks involved, and then, if you are good, bumpf!, you win a huge amount, the kind that would fall from the sky. You're in! The way you can win at roulette gives me hope that there is more to this world than just work, work, work, with no end to the daily slog in sight. Life gains meaning when I stand at the roulette table, I become something special. I no longer care about the shortages of cooking oil, washing powder or petrol which, for example this week, you could only buy if your number plates end in an odd number. I really have a gut feeling for roulette, a hunch as to what is going to come up. I know how to build a game, but of course you must have a decent amount to start with if you want to play big; seven thousand Austrian schillings, that's about one thousand German marks at least; there isn't much point in piddling around with any less. My strategy is to immediately reinvest all my winnings and thus up the

bets gradually, setting the course for the one great combination bet which will rake in all the money. It has often been close; I have driven the whole operation right to the end and then something unexpected happens, making me lose my concentration for one brief moment and puff!, the entire operation collapses. Perhaps someone next to me knocked over a stash of chips that rolled all over the floor or something like that. But this is nothing but a mere temporary hurdle; one has to be patient and have a certain amount of nerve. My day is sure to come and then I will make an absolute fortune in foreign currency.

Once or twice I took Nataša with me to the casino in Unterjeserz, after she asked me nicely. I think she really enjoyed it. She laughed all evening and even flirted a little with some guys. I had to give her one of those strict looks and at some point I got so angry I wanted to slap her across the face. She brought her own stash of money with her, miniscule as it was; one hundred marks for which she got seven hundred schillings; she bet with the lowest denomination chips, the ones for twenty schillings. Of course she was only able to do this for the first couple of hours since later on the low-value tokens are not accepted, which gets rid of the OAPs and other cheapskates gambling for small change. But, clueless as she is, she was lucky in those two hours, placing bets with the lowest risk, colours or column bets, but still managed to win a few. For every hundred marks she brought with her she must have managed to win about thirty extra (converting it all from schillings) on the first evening and forty on the second. She was very proud of herself. I tried to explain that this was a mere pittance, peanuts, but she argued that the bank saw it differently: thirty to forty percent on any given sum in a single day is quite an achievement, a fantastic return. The dumb psychology of a bank clerk! She does not how to be extravagant and grandiose, to really make something out of big assets, winning for example tenfold. But it's all just a bit of fun, we don't go to the casino to torture ourselves with unrealized megalomaniac plans, Nataša would answer and look at me with her huge eyes. A bit of fun! To her it's just a bit of fun, but to me it is serious stuff. She cannot or does not want to understand that I am systematically going after the big prize that will see me through the next few years. At present I live an impecunious life, but in spirit at least I live in the future – then things will be different. Presently everything seems to constrain me, even Nataša. When I win and pay back all the money she has lent me, I will probably decide to pick a new bird, one more glamorous, more sophisticated. Then I will also start sorting out some of the other important stuff I have long been planning to attend to; like devoting myself to film, for example, shoot one of those short films.

Nataša wants to keep coming to the casino in Unterjeserz with me. She keeps hinting at this at every opportunity. When I go alone she gives me one of those looks and then mopes round the flat until I come back. Upon my return she starts questioning me about how much I have gambled away, accuses me of playing too 'artistically' and nags on about how we do not have the money to spend this way. The other day I just couldn't hold back and I slapped her twice across her impudent mouth, resulting in a lot of screaming and shouting and crying. We only calmed down much later after having sex. But Nataša just does not give up. She has this idea that she can help me and that she could be, in her own words, the 'controller' of my game.

For God's sake! She would look after the money and decide when I should place bets with greater risks and when I should bet on those with lower odds, when I should place high value chips and when I should use the lower denominations – and even when I should stop playing and go home. All this is the whole point of having a strategy and tactics; it is precisely these decisions that separate the professional from the amateur! Besides, the way I see gambling, it is a male thing, personal and very much the business of an individual. It is something a man should pursue on his own; one could say a gambler is like a lone cowboy. I do not want anyone to help me, not Nataša, nor Clarius, nor Schwimmbacher!

Alright, if she insists, she can come along; I realise there is no way she is going to give up. Damn it, I know she is just going to be bored. First she will hang around the roulette table, until they stop accepting the cheap chips, then she will try her luck at the slot machines, and end up sitting in some corner, like most of the other escorts, waiting to go home. But she can just wait.

We arranged when we would go to the casino in Unterjeserz again; at the weekend, not this coming one, but the next.

When you arrange something with a woman, there is no guarantee that this is actually what is going to happen. It's Wednesday and we had planned to go to the casino at the weekend, but then the reservations start to appear. Nataša is sulking. "I don't know about our arrangement. The casino – I see it as a huge waste of time and money and really don't know what's worse for me, wasting time or money. You know, a thousand marks, that's a lot of money for us. Can we really afford it? You haven't contributed to the housekeeping for months and months; but we need to eat, we need to pay the rent, the electricity; and with my job as a clerk really cannot support the both of us; you know that I share the job and am on half pay. I am fed up with this bank, I cannot stand seeing the burnt out OAPs queuing in front of my window at the end of every month. You know, I'd like to go to the casino, but on a smaller scale, you see? With a much smaller budget, let's say a hundred marks each. A thousand marks to me seems like we're taking God for a ride."

I have decided to no longer to discuss the problem of funds with Nataša; she always gets emotional and I can't deal with that; all I can do is slap her. What I will try to do is open the door into the metaphysics of numbers for her – not that I trust she will really comprehend the metaphysics, but perhaps I can explain it to her as a sort of poetry, then maybe she'll get it. Surely she has an artistic streak; at least sometimes it seems to me that she does! I went off to my study and returned with a small pile of booklets in German. But one doesn't need to know German to read them, they were ... what are called '*permanences*', booklets recording the order of the numbers thrown at a roulette table of a given casino over, for example, the last four years. Any reputable casino publishes them and it is possible to buy them going back years and years. It was Knez who suggested I studied permanences and even lent me a few, suggesting I used them

as a dry run instead of spinning a ball in a pathetic imitation roulette wheel I bought in the toy section of the local supermarket. Permanences are records of actual events, Knez said with an air of importance; of the actual numbers thrown for example in the casino in Baden-Baden between the first day of January and the last day of March of 1981; mini roulettes made of cheap plastic are truly pathetic.

“Come on, darling; come closer, come sit next to me. Look, can you see! Numbers, my God, that’s a lot of numbers, isn’t it? One gazes and gazes at them and it is difficult to make any sense and understand what they are there for. Perhaps they even scare you, eh? But you need to start using that brain, you need to delve in, work hard and figure out the meaning hidden in this shambles. Playing roulette is fighting chaos. And how can we do this? We need to look out for dominants. Look to see which numbers have been thrown and figure out which are still to come up. To start with we shall look for the easy dominants, those consisting of either only red or only black numbers; they are the most obvious ones. So, let’s have a look. Gotcha, here, look! A red number nine times in a row, see, look at this column, starting with 27, 9, 18 and so on, get it, nine in a row, oh, I am so lucky! This is living proof, ink on paper, that this really happened, in Baden-Baden on February 3rd, 1981; this isn’t just something someone made up! Red, nine in a row! Suddenly we see something recognizable, something familiar, like the asterism of the Plough forming amidst the myriad of other stars, all bright and shiny; and now, what do we have to do? Darling, what next?”

I got all excited, jumped towards the fridge, pulled out a litre of Ribolla, opened it quickly and poured myself a glass; after a brief thought I also poured out a glass for Nataša. “What do we have to do when the Plough appears? Now you have to allow your intuition to take over and let the bright stars pull you all the way across the night sky. Whoever figures this out is sure to reap rich rewards. For example let’s say, someone who bet a thousand schillings on red, now needs to do little else but sit and wait, watching his luck mature. When a red is thrown the first time and the croupier places a second thousand-schilling chip next to yours, one has to have the nerve and control any trifling greed not to grab both chips, withdraw from the crowd and quietly enjoy the gains somewhere in the background. No, you can’t do that, you have to leave both chips on the table. And then a second red is thrown and the croupier adds two more thousand-schilling chips and you leave the lot in place. You don’t need to *do* anything; the croupier will do the work for you; you just check that everything is okay. For as long as the dominant lasts, after every spin, the croupier shall double the amount that is already yours, over and over, from a thousand schillings you get two, then four, then eight, then sixteen thousand and you sit, wait and enjoy; at the end of the winning streak you have made... just a sec... let me use my calculator... click, click, click, click, click... here, 512,000 schillings; that is, that is... click, click, click... 73,000 marks!”

I downed another glass of Ribolla and kissed Nataša on the lips. I was really enthusiastic, rightly so too! I had just demonstrated luck in its purest form to her, well documented as well! This actually happened! Information about the place and date is given! Nataša didn’t seem so convinced. “Hang on, just hang on a sec, Kontler, what if the ball doesn’t land on red nine times

in a row, but, let's say, only six? In this case you will not only not make anything, but even lose the thousand schillings you started off with, won't you? And one more thing, Kontler, just tell me the number of times you have taken a thousand marks, marks, not schillings, to the casino in Unterjeserz? Let's say thirty? And you always lose in the end, so that means you have a net loss of 30,000 marks – that is a small fortune! Do you not realise what we could do with this kind of money?"

I had to control myself, not to slap her across her smooth, angelic face; this woman sure knows how to make me absolutely livid in an instant, whether she wants to or not. I stayed silent for a while, closing my eyes in agony. Then I opened them again. "Darling, I can only say one word: trust! If you want us to continue nicely together, then you absolutely have to believe in my feeling, my hunch, my intuition. Do not forget that I always win at the start; I only lose later when something always happens to shatter my concentration. But this time you are going to be there, aren't you, to look after me and make sure my concentration stays at its peak. Aren't you? Of course you are, darling, and that is the whole point of it, that is why we are a couple!"

A month went by and we didn't manage to go to the casino together. Nataša insisted that we only take a hundred marks each: "We are, after all, only going for the fun, not as lackeys for the cash." To me such fun is absurd, suitable only for pensioners. So, as usual, I went to the casino alone.

I am in Mirna Peč in rural Lower Carniola now, at my mother's, in the meadows of my youth. I went to the casino again on Sunday and as I was driving back home despairing and broke, over the Loibl Pass from Austria, down towards Ljubljana, along the main road into town, left at the Workers' Union building, past the railway station and turned into our road, approaching the house with the cast iron railings, that damn house, I suddenly could not stand the idea that I would have to face Nataša and all her questioning. Nope, I needed to get away from the house, and away from Ljubljana, I decided in an instant, and shot straight past the house. Before I realized it I was driving through the tunnel under Castle Hill and then turned left towards 'home'.

But this was the return. First came my trip to the casino. I called in at Knez and Anja's on the way. They were spending a long weekend in the mountains on this side of the Loibl Pass. I wanted to persuade Knez to come to the casino with me. He wasn't in the mood and I crossed the border on my own. At the checkpoint a Yugoslav customs official beckoned me to pull over. He stood by the car and asked me if I had anything to declare; I coolly said I didn't; then he just as coolly stretched his arm through the window, opened the ashtray on the dashboard, took out my two five-hundred-mark banknotes and said: "We are seizing this, sir." His wretched paw retreated back through the window, carrying with it all my precious assets, the fruit of my deprivation, that I had already envisaged lying on the table, on the winning number. This money

was about to increase tenfold, more even... oh, my... that evening I would have played so well I would have swept the table clean.

I had two options as to where I could hide the money from customs: my underpants or the ashtray. The latter seemed better, kind of more subtle, carelessly pretending it was just some small change. And that was exactly where this troglodyte had to poke his fingers and destroy my ingenious plan – that’s life for you, yes, that precisely is life. You can be a living genius but still get slaughtered in no time by some primitive Neanderthal, some illiterate halfwit official who hasn’t got the faintest clue what he is supposed to be doing. I have to work really hard for a thousand marks, borrow, save, forego and forfeit, try to flog a whole mountain of books to some daft office workers at the Cultural Council or the Trades Union Offices who are unable to decide whether to buy or not; it can be fun when you get results, but when things aren’t going well it is dull as hell and downright degrading.

The incident at the border checkpoint was just the final straw on top of all my other calamities. Pellaprat’s cookbook was not selling well, the three-volume Junior Encyclopaedia even less so. Maybe it’s just the time of year, or maybe it’s me; other book subscription salesmen seem to be doing well. There’s Druškovič for example; we went to the Town Hall together the other day; hoards of office women seemed to descend upon him; none even looked at me, let alone listened to what I had to say. I am probably not suave enough for them. Then there is another mistake I made: I managed to collect a few cash subscriptions, but instead of taking them to the head of the sales department, I took them straight to the casino. There, as usual, things were going well to start with but then bad luck struck and I lost the lot. The boss has demanded the money twice already and could easily call in the police to get the money I owe. Then there’s Nataša, nagging at me more and more how she cannot support me financially with her bank clerk wage and how this was not how she had imagined it; her slogging away for the two of us while “Mr. Dandy lazes around and carries it all off to the casino.” Laze, the hell! My brain keeps ticking away, processing data, night and day; I am working for the both of us, but she doesn’t see it this way yet! Damn cow, when I finally strike big at roulette I will chuck all I owe her tenfold right in her face, twentyfold, even, let her choke on the money, the selfish, egotistical bitch! All she can ever think about is her own arse and what clothes she wants to wear, not even trying to understand the pressures I am under. She didn’t have a penny to her name when I took her in and started going out with her; I gave her everything, and this is gratitude for you!

Well, things with Nataša are probably not all quite as I wrote yesterday. She probably does even love me. At least when I see her cry or laugh because of me, I am convinced of this. At other times...

At the Loibl Pass border crossing they held on to my thousand marks and when I drove down into Austria, into the valley of the river Drava, tears started rolling from my eyes and I could not stop myself from crying. Why should I make all this effort when it is all in vain; whatever I do, someone always pushes my face in a pile of shit! And what am I supposed to do now without enough money to play. Still, the car drove to Unterjeserz more-or-less on its own and stopped

in the car park at the casino. Now, as I was there anyway, I went inside; I still had enough for the entrance fee and got five fifty-schilling chips in return. This is not a lot and anyone knows you are hardly likely to have any big gains from this amount. To start with I was on the up for a while and then, fat chance, I lost the lot and that was the end. What now? I didn't want to go home yet and decided I would try to acquire a chip or two through the 'adoptive father' system, a sort of natural result of the firm rule that it's not enough to win, but you also need to collect your winnings. First I select a victim; some absolute dipstick of a player placing fistfuls of chips on three tables at once, jumping between them all the time. In my mind I adopt some smallish chip on some less exciting bets and if it wins and I see that the owner is busy elsewhere at the time, I raise my hand pretending it is mine. If the place is crowded and I am lucky, they pay me the winnings.

Second variant: 'displacing a chip'. I hold a single chip in my hand and wave it above a crowded area, making it look like I am about to place a bet, but am in fact fixed on some smallish bet placed by the same witless player I identified earlier. Then I lower my hand and place my chip, at the same time knock the chip ever so slightly with my little finger, displacing it onto another square. If it wins, I claim it as mine since by then no one really knows who the chip actually belonged to.

Third variant: 'under the table'. I find the table with the largest crowd jostling against it and go down on all fours, pretending, for example, that I have accidentally dropped my watch or something. I often find a chip on the floor, sometimes even a two hundred schilling one. This means I will be able to continue playing and will, in theory, again have a chance of returning home filthy rich. But on Sunday the 'adoptive father' system didn't yield anything; nothing worked, not even crawling all over the floor on my knees for what seemed like an unbearably long time. Maybe it was that the croupiers all knew jolly well that I had not been playing before, that I had come to the casino just to sponge. All I got was their humiliating looks and nothing else. Why is it always me that gets shit like this thrown at him? Does it look like I have less pride than other people? Perhaps I really do have less?

Mirna Peč: I am sitting at the desk in my childhood room, writing; mother brings me tea, always happy when I come home – well, at least that is what she says, though I wish she would not keep asking me when I will get a proper job, one with a wage and pension contributions; this really gets on my nerves and I would appreciate her sometimes just shutting up. I scrounged fifty thousand dinars from her – the poor woman doesn't have more than that anyway, to her it is a small fortune. Outside the window I look at the landscape of my youth; Žgavc the neighbour is still around, plodding up and down on the other side of the fence; God knows where he scrapes up the money for food. I have my green jumper in the boot of my car, the one I always have with me in case it should suddenly turn cold; I will leave it here at mother's place and she can take it into the local second-hand clothes shop and perhaps get a few bob for it. I can't be bothered to return to Ljubljana; I will stay here a little longer to recharge my batteries.

I went to Unterjeserz on Saturday.

Here in Mirna Peč I can afford to do what I like most: dream. I lie on the worn-out leather divan, stare at the ceiling and make sure I don't close my eyes. I don't want to fall asleep. What would I like most in the world? The thing I would like most is to sweep clean the roulette table to the last yellow chip, causing them to stop the game for the evening. That is what I would really like. The rules are that if a player wins all the assets from a table, then the roulette table is bankrupt. Seven million schillings – that is one million marks. A certain ritual will follow my win. It has already become my soul's gospel and I am truly looking forward to it: the croupier, master of the wheel, in charge of spinning the ball and paying up, will calculate and use his rake to push this whole mountain of chips in front of me; then he will stop the wheel, yes, stop it. The chief croupier in charge of the table, sitting on a raised area overlooking the layout will stand up. The other three croupiers will follow him out like a row of geese and return after a while with a heavy black-velvet cover. They will drape it over the dead table and the chief croupier will call out with a piercing strong voice, prevailing over all other noise in the hall: "Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to announce, that table number three has gone bankrupt!"

It will bring the hall to a standstill; all eyes will turn towards our table; the four croupiers will be back at their posts, three at the head and one at the far end of the layout, but they will not sit down; they will stand like a guard of honour next to the body lying in wake. They will all be facing... me and now the entire hall will follow the direction of their gaze and also stare... at me. I will stand there, smiling and crying a little at the same time, my face shiny and sweaty; and I will bow slightly. Then I will have to get this mountain of chips to the cage cashier, some of them the size of small bricks – those are the fattest buggers, worth a hundred-thousand schillings each. I will not be able to carry them alone; two attendants in green uniforms and flat green caps on their heads will bring a special trolley; I will award them both with a couple of low-value chips each, two hundred schillings or so. I will slowly walk behind the trolley and the crowd will continue to stare at me with a mixture of awe and admiration, but the situation will slowly begin to return to normal again; the noise will gradually return; games at the other tables will resume. At the cashier I will request a single cheque for seven million schillings, cashable at one of the local Austrian banks. Of course I have no intention of taking the money back over the border into Yugoslavia; I'm not nuts quite yet!

I was at the casino again on Sunday.

A brief overview of everyone I managed to pump for money over the last couple of months; money I then took off to the casino: I got one thousand marks from Duxo in lieu of some stylish cupboards I am flogging him. A bit more from mother, too. I went to scrounge some from Marjanca; she cried when she saw me and didn't want to give me any to start with, but eventually gave me just over five hundred marks. I also collected some new subscriptions to the junior encyclopaedia from some trusting women at the Institute of Physiotherapy, amounting to around two hundred and fifty marks when converted. Again I didn't hand in the money to accounts. I also went to see Beni Dovič; he gave me eight hundred marks, but told me he didn't

believe a single word I said and not to come again because he can't stand the sight of me. The one person sure to go up the wall is Druškovič. He lent me his car, an almost new Volkswagen Golf, and I underhandedly sold it for a ridiculously low price, which converts to around one thousand seven hundred marks. Druškovič won't find me easily since he doesn't know my rural address (nor does Nataša).

I go back across the border from the casino again. And again I don't go back to the flat, but follow the usual route: main road into town – Workers' Union building – railway station – past the house; damn the place – tunnel – left towards Lower Carniola. At least here I have peace and quiet – well, relative peace and quiet.

Here in Mirna Peč I have got used to taking a leisurely walk to the coffee place at the bus stop every morning. I order a glass of white wine and take it to the long narrow bar table with a thick wooden surface and its base fixed to the floor, intended for one to stand at. I sip on my wine, smoke, lean on the bar and watch the passengers or stare through the glass wall out to the spring day outside. Today a couple of guys joined me at the bar and straight away started away at their pursuit. One of them produced three plastic cups from his jacket and placed them upside down on the table surface. He shuffled them around, pushing them left and right and then lifted one up and, surprise! there was a bean underneath it. He quickly replaced the cup, shuffled them all again and looked at the second guy enquiringly. Of course I knew where the bean was. The second guy thought a while and then pointed at one of the cups; when the first guy lifted the cup, that was where the bean was. Bingo! "Come on Genie, catch your prey." With a look of defeat, the crook shuffling the cups instantly paid the winner a five-hundred dinar bank note – a ridiculously low bet if you consider that it is only just over four marks. He kept his money under a cigarette packet that just happened to be lying there.

I knew I was the game they were hunting for.

I live here more than I do in Ljubljana. Occasionally I pop back to the flat for a few days, but as soon as I appear, Nataša starts yakking away and does not let up. I prefer it here, though mother has also started to mutter, ever more so. I sort of escape from one to the other.

But all these are side issues; the main point is to bankrupt the roulette table. I will do it I will succeed. I have the feeling, the nose for singling out a number; I know how to keep changing tactics and strategies; this is also why I have often been so close; truly close indeed. A nose, an intuition, a feeling, that's what it's about. I know how to tune into these feelings and also tune into the roulette table and find out what is in stall, waiting to happen. I am as sly as a fox, sweeping its tracks with its tail; no one can get me. I know precisely what I am doing.

There is another approach, one that I laugh at and scorn, the so-called scientific approach. Knez is getting into it and thinks he is some kind of researcher. He keeps explaining it to me and goes on and on regardless of whether or not I want to listen to him. It is purportedly proven in the research of famous mathematicians dealing with calculating odds, coincidence theory, chaos theory, and stuff like that. Great names without a doubt, Pascal and so on, though I cannot

remember all of them. But their research has been appropriated by fuck-ups who pretend to be theorists of hazard and publish it in their supposedly scientific books. All these guys are passionate gamblers, spending their whole lives in casinos. But their books cannot be trusted – if they were really that clever they would all be millionaires by now and would not need to write hazard manuals. On top of this they accuse everyone else of being mere charlatans.

One of these theories did, for a while at least, manage to captivate me. It was the Clarius-Schwimmbacher theorem. It is derived from the physiology of the croupier's hand, purporting it to be something unique and unrepeatable, much like one's fingerprints, dependant on the combination of muscles, ligaments and bones. This means that all throws by any one croupier are in principle similar, however much the croupier may try to throw differently each time. It follows that if you look carefully at which segment of the wheel the croupier throws the ball towards and how hard he throws it, you can also suss out approximately where it will stop. The croupier's throw can be seen, metaphorically speaking, as a type of bowling where the throw of the ball is to some extent predictable. The gaming industry is aware of this and tries to protect its game in two ways: 1) the croupier must alternately throw clock-wise and anti-clock-wise; 2) after twenty or so throws he hands over to a different croupier – this called for by the chief croupier issuing the explicit order: "*La boule passe*". For a few months, maybe a year or so, I was also a fan of this theory; I studied the ball-throwing techniques of various croupiers, trying to catch the instant the croupier throws the ball and then having to swiftly place my chips, as only a second or two later the call for no more bets, "*Rien ne va plus!*" is made. I must admit, I did have some success and there is something to this Clarius-Schwimmbacher theorem, but it requires too much finicky scrupulosity and calculation, so I returned to my previously tried-out method of gut feeling and intuition – the realm of freedom and artistic expression which is my field of specialty. In fact I abandoned Clarius when Schwimmbacher, his prophet, started to demand of their followers that they also take into account the weather conditions, as these can decisively influence the physiology of the hand, as well as the rebound factor of the wood along which the ball rolls.

I could publish these notes of mine at some point; surely people would be interested. Perhaps I would need to check through them first and take the personal bits out. The problem with stuff like this is finding a publisher. I don't trust any of them in this country and would not even offer it in Slovenia. But then there is the same problem abroad; what's my guarantee? Someone might accept the manuscript for consideration and then steal it; publish it under their own name and collect all the royalties!

A month has gone by. I used to be so systematic, now I am completely messed up; I feel I am not quite with it. I sit at the table and read permanences, making notes. Nataša is standing by the stove, cooking lunch. Every now and then she looks lovingly at me and says a kind word or two; on the surface all is fine, even pleasant, but I feel that she is treating me like a patient, not daring to upset me in case it adversely affects my health or something. Nataša makes pasta, serves it

onto two plates, pours the sauce over it and also makes a salad. We eat in silence, almost idyllically, but things are not right. Then Nataša says:

“I’ll come to the casino with you, so you don’t go on your own. Keep an eye on the thousand marks you said you still have; I certainly don’t; I ran out of any spare money a long time ago.”

“Alright, darling,” I answer as if I did not mind at all. Then we continue eating. We sit at the table, her face right in front of me, though it no longer looks as angelic now, since it has a large blackish, greenish and purplish bruise on the left side of her forehead.

Saturday at the casino with Nataša. First I dabbled here and there, then settled for table 3, jumping to the neighbouring tables occasionally. More often I sent Nataša there, gave her chips and instructed her where and what amount to bet. I soon discovered that this evening the ball had taken a liking to me I was predicting its pace and messages with relative ease. I kept placing ever higher valued chips on the table in ever greater quantities. Whatever I came up with, everything was good and seemed to work. I started getting a little conceited. “What if I tried to play it Nataša’s way; less risky bets on colours and columns. Of course not with twenty schilling tokens like her, but five thousand schillings!” I tried and it worked. I tried with ten thousand schillings and it worked again. Chips seemed to be rolling my way. I grabbed a couple of fistfuls, called Nataša over and stuffed them into her handbag. “Go and cash this in for schillings at the till, go out of the casino and turn left; two hundred yards down the road you will find a shop called *Der heiße Draht Electronics*, we’ve been there before, remember, and there you buy me a Sony car stereo; the specifications are here on this piece of paper; and a Sony video recorder, here is a piece of paper with the details! Take all the stuff directly to the car, it’s out in the parking lot, here are the keys; then come straight back here!”

I had thought this move out back in Mirna Peč. Were Nataša to come to the casino with me and were I to happen upon a winning streak, I would straight away send her off to buy various gadgets, the value of which at least would then be secure and not be lost at the gambling table. From this point onwards, after Nataša left, I only remember events in flashes rather than a continuous sequence. I felt feverish. The dauntingly bright lights in the hall made my eyes sore. I bet like mad, without even checking to see what numbers were falling or using any of my well-thought-through strategies. I trembled, hot and cold flushes surging through me; it was as if it wasn’t me, as if someone else was leading my hand and pushing heaps of chips around the table; these kept returning in ever greater quantities. At some point I realized that I was running low so I bet all I had left on a column; then once more and once again, pulling myself from the abyss back onto an upwards streak. I also kept sending self-appointed helpers, vultures of kind, to neighbouring tables. They bet for me and brought back the winnings – well, at least in as far as they really did bring it back. I know the chief croupier gave me a couple of piercing looks, but I was unable to gather what he was getting at; I was hardly aware of who I was. Suddenly I started

running out of chips again. Moments ago I had a whole wall of them on the table in front of me, now there was only a miserable handful.

Nataša reappeared next to me and told me she had taken all the gadgets to the car. What gadgets? I asked her to produce the chips I gave her to put into her handbag for safekeeping. "I used them to buy the car stereo and the video recorder, as you told me." What do you mean used them, miserable wretch? I grabbed her by the shoulders and threateningly pushed my face into hers and demanded she give me the chips. Can't you see I urgently need them? Can't you see I am in distress here? Nataša burst into tears.

"I don't have them, I swear! I did exactly what you told me to do. But I can give you my money if you want, in cash." How much? "Three thousand five hundred schillings." But you said you didn't have any money left. "I didn't, but I borrowed a hundred marks from my sister." And? "That is seven hundred schillings, I bet them and ended up with three and a half thousand. Then I went to the cage cashier and had them pay the winnings out in cash." You won... four hundred percent? And I am supposed to believe you? Don't lie to me! You can't lie to me! This is my money! You embezzled it from me! "I didn't, I swear," Nataša cried as I shook her shoulders, her head thrashing about and saliva dripping out of her open mouth, "just take the money Kontler, please, and don't treat me like this, let go of me!" I grabbed her three and a half thousand schillings and stuck the actual banknotes on red. The croupier in charge of the wheel said "*Rien ne va plus*," changed the banknotes for chips and just as he placed the last one on red, the ball rolled into and stopped on 17, black. Black. My lucky number 17 that I had let down was now punishing me in an exemplary manner. Finished. In the next moment the croupier was raking my chips along the layout towards the far end of the table where he had a temporary stash. He then stacked them into piles, placing some into his special holder.

The end. It was two in the morning. Nataša and I dragged ourselves into the foyer and collapsed into the armchairs in the corner. I know I kept muttering something and Nataša cried quietly. What now? What now? I suddenly noticed the croupier from table number 3, standing a few paces away. He was lightly bowing and smiling at departing guests, but when there was no one in front of him, his smile vanished and he stared somewhere into the distance with an expressionless face. It was probably his way of relaxing. Without thinking what I was doing, I stood up, approached him and asked him politely but with a sense of urgency: "Excuse me. What now? What now? What is one supposed to do now?" He turned his chiselled head towards me – a head of a... Druid or a Roman legionnaire. It has been a long time since I thought a man's head so splendid. He looked at me detachedly as if we were not in the same dimension. "Mr Kontler," he addressed me; I was not getting anything from his voice; a pause; "Madam," he bowed his head slightly in Nataša's direction. He turned back to me. "Come to the *Zum Schwein* bar in three quarters of an hour, at three. It's behind the car park, you can't miss it. You can walk there." Another barely noticeable bow and he was gone.

Nataša and I sat there for a little while longer, getting up to check the time on the clock on the wall and sitting back down. Then we left, what else were we to do? We crossed the huge

car park where my car was parked on the left and reached a road going uphill. This part of town was obviously older; no more grandiose buildings, but single-story houses with steep roofs squashed in a row. A hundred yards up the road we came to a large imposing 19th-century building that must have once been a factory. It now looked pretty grim on the outside with the façade in disrepair, peeling away in some places. The street lamp near the main entrance was not working, making the place look even more abandoned. To the left though were some prefab stairs that looked like a metal tower going up to the first floor level where one of the windows had been converted into a metal door. A small but glaring sign announced the name of the joint: *Zum Schwein*. We plodded up the metal stairs; I pushed the door open and we went in.

We found ourselves in a relatively large space; the ceiling was supported by columns, someone had tried to hide how worn the floor was by strategically placing pieces of carpet and covered the walls with wooden panelling up to eye level. It was lit by bare fluorescent lights and garishly green and violet neon signs. In all it was a spartan joint used by those who worked through the night: truck drivers, cops, security officers, taxi drivers and people like that. We went to the bar and the barman looked at us and politely said: "We invite the respected lady to stay here where she will be a guest of our establishment. You are welcome to order anything you want, madam. Sir, please, do come in." He gestured to Nataša to sit down and opened the flap leading behind the bar where he then directed me to a discreet door marked with a single sign: a croupier's rake. A well lit narrow corridor on the other side of the door led to the left, and a double leather-clad door at the end. I hesitated a little, but then entered rather hurriedly.

What was inside? A roulette table, what else! Four croupiers stood in a tight group near the entrance, chatting. As soon as I arrived, they sat at their respective work places. Our acquaintance with the striking head placed himself on the elevated seat at the head of the layout; lower down sat the croupiers in charge of the wheel and the one in charge of the chips; the fourth sat at the foot of the table. Our acquaintance was no longer wearing his dress suit, but a sort of elegant tracksuit, just like the other three. There were no other guests apart from myself and it was as if the roulette table was not intended for players since there was not a single token on the layout. There was a bookshelf and a cupboard full of files next to the wall, a table and chairs in one corner and a writing desk in the other. Were these the headquarters of some sort of professional croupier union? Or the croupiers' sporting club?

The roulette wheel spun silently. They all stared at me. There were two coloured posters on the wall. A title in bold showed that one depicted the *Physiologie der Hand* and the other the *Physiologie des Ober- und Unterarms*. Both were hugely enlarged schematic anatomy drawings. Looking at the images, first one, then the other and the first one again, something seemed to surge through my solar plexus. "The answer is here in this room," I realised, though I can't say I was particularly happy. "The physiology of the hand."

"Mr. Kontler," the croupier at the head of the table spoke in his colourless voice. "You wanted special information and you are about to receive it." Pause. "Despite the fact that you dedicate most of your time to roulette, you know precious little about it. You think you are a

professional, but you only occupy yourself with fantasies. It is precisely these fantasies that prevent you from seeing the situation realistically or at least reading our information material, for God's sake." The other two croupiers at the top of the table nodded; maybe the one at the bottom end did too, but I was not looking in his direction. "The concept of the casino has changed a great deal in recent years, a great deal indeed. Now the social-interactive aspect of this institution is emphasised. Maybe you have noticed the posters in the foyer; fashion shows, poetry evenings, jazz festivals, scientific and popular science lectures and art exhibitions, are organised regularly; we once even had a professional meeting of the heads of the Philosophy Faculty. Accordingly our target audience has also changed; now they are members of an average family – the father, the mother and a teenage kid or two. Let them all come, allow them all to join in the fun. The emphasis is on civilised entertainment in tandem with moderate gains; no way is it about gaining some extortionate wealth. In this context your desire to cause the bankruptcy of the roulette table are positively antediluvian. It is also very much against our own interests if someone comes to our establishment and, with a stubborn insistence on risky bets, spends huge amounts of money, which threatens the living standards of those close to him. We do not approve of this, it damages our prestige."

The four croupiers sat motionless like dolls. Or like members of a tribunal. "Mr. Kontler," the chief croupier continued, "I said you would get information and you shall. But you will also have a demonstration, a live one, prepared by the entire team. A person as well informed about the world of roulette as you are is sure to have heard of the Clarius-Schwimmbacher theorem, perhaps even in detail. He smiled at me ever so slightly and tilted his head to the right. "It would be unwise to think that the gaming industry has neglected the theorem or just left it exposed to the elements. It too has been concerned with it, not just a few clever players; it even commissioned special scientific research on the matter." He returned his head to its original position. "I quote Clarius: 'The physiology of the croupier's hand is something unique and unrepeatable, much like one's fingerprints, dependant on the combination of muscles, ligaments and bones. This means that all throws by any one croupier are in principle similar.' In all your self-importance you believed that only the users, the players are capable of thinking about the practical application of this scientific discovery; that only they can think of studying the ball-throwing techniques of the croupier's hand. But that is not how it is."

He leaned towards me. I wished he would have invited me to sit down, but it seemed this would have to wait. "It probably still holds that your favourite numbers are 17 and 29. Please chose one only." A hot and then a cold flush surged through my chest, a storm of astonishment in realizing he knew my lucky numbers, but soon after this was followed by a sort of trance; I was seeing myself from a distance and it was a feeling that had overwhelmed me when playing and even more so after I had lost everything. Seventeen, I said without even thinking. "I thought you were going to say that. Now, please, choose one of the croupiers." Again without thinking, I pointed to the croupier, master of the wheel, he is the one I trust most at any table. "That was also not surprising. Monsieur croupier, please proceed with the demonstration." The addressed took the ball, weighed it, bent over the wheel that was still spinning silently, closed one eye,

observed the numbers rushing by, waited a little and then with a professional movement of the wrist sent the ball buzzing in wide-angled arches right under the edge of the concave track around the circumference of the wheel. Then it started to lose momentum, descended towards the wheel itself and stopped on... 17. Another hot and cold flush hit my chest. He threw my lucky number!

“Incredible luck, isn’t it? But I assume I have not quite convinced you just how incredible. Please choose a different croupier.” I pointed to the croupier at the foot of the table. “You have chosen what you presume to be the least experienced man, and I can absolutely understand you; of course you wish him to lose, which would mean I am wrong. Well, chose a number!” A deluge of numbers flooded through my mind, so fast I could hardly see them and had difficulties staying in control. Seventeen again, I managed to utter. “Cunning, very cunning! The chance of the same number coming up twice in a row is very small. Monsieur croupier!” he called upon the croupier at the far end. He sent the ball into the wheel with a slightly different move to the previous man, partially aided by the movement of his elbow. We waited whilst it circled and buzzed, descended and fell into ... number 17. My heart ached, my stomach burned, my head pounded. Now what is this? What is this? Damn Clarius, damn Schwimmbacher! The wheel has been tampered with! a futile hope crossed my mind. They predicted which numbers I would choose and now they keep manipulating the wheel. But I can see that this is not true; the ball is behaving perfectly normally! Yet – it is impossible that a croupier would know how to throw the ball exactly where he wanted! Roulette is not bowling! Or maybe it is? Isn’t this precisely what Clarius and Schwimmbacher are getting at? Which number should I chose that they could not have predicted? Which number should I ask for? “What number would you ask for now?” Nothing predictable, I warned. No birth date, no house number, no number plate, no national insurance number, nothing of the sort! Nor my second lucky number, 29! No prime number! Think of something nobody will be able to predict! 26, I shot out! “Good choice. The logic of contrast. 26, the most lucrative number of the *Zero Spiel* call bet, the exact opposite of *Orphelins*. And who should throw now, Mr. Kontler?” I looked away from the ball riding along on the wheel on number 17 and looked at the chiselled druidic face. Should I chose the previous guy or should I ask for this pagan? “You, sir,” I said.

He smiled politely, took the ball, pushed the wheel so it accelerated a little and said: “I am honoured by your choice. The ball will stop at number 26 after... let me think... it will have circled the wheel eleven...” he looked at me facetiously, “and a half times.” He took great care in leaning over the wheel, observed, waited and then threw the ball. Buzzing; I closed my eyes; clacketing, silence, I opened my eyes; 26, what else. Madness, total madness. “You will understand, Mr. Kontler that this demonstration cannot go on forever. How many further throws do you request? One, two, three?” Three, I whispered. We got through these three throws as well, performed by the fourth croupier who also hit the exact numbers I gave him. The Clarius-Schwimmbacher theorem! These devils realised its potential, studied it meticulously, turned its purpose upside down and practiced it to perfection. These fiends throw the ball so it falls exactly where they want it to.

“And now the moral of this demonstration, Mr. Kontler. As you know, Pascal invented the roulette wheel as a spontaneous way of finding random numbers. But we have now proven to you that Pascal was wrong. Great minds can also be wrong sometimes. There are no random numbers; there can be no created chaos. These are phantasms. What is real is programmed and controlled. This means you will have to draw a line underneath your way of life, Mr. Kontler. Your future is certainly not in the casino, since no croupier in the world would for any price want to throw the number you have placed your bet on. This is an agreement and any croupier not respecting it would be severely punished. It doesn't matter whether you go to Timișoara or to a casino in Costa do Saúpe. This is because your hazardous ideas are not only old fashioned, but particularly negative, destructive and vindictive. As soon as you enter the casino you are a danger to yourself and others, Mr. Kontler. The casino is not for the likes of you, for maddened loners, but for those wanting to do something socially; something positive socially. I hope you have understood: do not come to the casino any longer; from today all casinos have lost any meaning for you.” He produced an envelope, opened it and showed me seven thousand schilling banknotes and resealed it before handing it over to me. “We are returning the costs of your visit here today. Do not pretend that this is some kind of bribe with which we are buying your silence. Quite the opposite, it would be our pleasure if you spread the word.” After a pause he added: “The Sony car stereo and video recorder – consider them our parting gifts,” another brief pause and: “Goodbye, sir.”

The chief croupier beckons to the one at the far end who steps to the door, opens it wide, steps back, leans slightly towards me and waits. Silence. I respond like a jumping jack: I leave making huge steps, leaning forwards, hand waving at the pace of my steps. It all happens very fast, very very fast; in fact I only make out I am walking, in reality I am sliding through the air like a hovercraft. Organ music pompously sounds in my head, some well known tune, what is it again? I grab Nataša on the way, pulling her off the bar stool; she seems as light as a feather. Next thing I know we are in my car, driving along the route it knows so well, up towards the Loibl Pass. I feel something salty running into my mouth – could it really be my tears? On our side of the border we begin our descent into the valley; far below us is a sea of dirty yellow fog. When we reach this yellowish brown stuff and drive into it, it suddenly feels much darker in the car. I can hear a grinding noise. Is that me grinding my teeth? Every so often we see figures appearing in the fog. It is a quarter to six. We had spent the whole night in Unterjeserz and these workers are already going to work. And here we are, right with you, you bloody socialist self-management workers, fucked-up brainwashed fools. Sod the whole damn lot of you.