

SAMPLE  
TRANSLATION

ROBERT SIMONIŠEK  
THE ROOM BELOW THE  
CASTLE

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## Robert Simonišek: The Room below the Castle

### 1.

After breaking down on the highway, he had to interrupt his journey for a few hours. When he re-joined the traffic he felt relief that neither the towing service nor the mechanic overcharged him. The greasy bearing wrapped in a plastic bag that the mechanic had carelessly tossed under the passenger seat took him back to 1991. Since that year Peter Mrak had been avoiding men who had anything whatsoever to do with the spare parts of any kind of vehicle. After he acquired a driver's license, he had asked partners or friends to take his car to be serviced and he was willing to pay them for this. His acquaintances could not understand his reluctance and he did not like explaining the reasons. He simply did not wish to go there, even when one of his friends accused him of being a snob.

Now, in the second millennium, sitting in his black Volvo, circling the compact town center looking for a parking space, Peter Mrak was still in the workshop where he had last seen his father. Axels, bearings, exhaust pipes, the smell of tires in a space full of mysterious tools as if it belonged to Hephaestus, all those carefully arranged objects that even two decades later he did not know the name of – this had represented paradise to his father. One bright afternoon, as his father was testing a car he had fixed, he drove into a canyon without saying goodbye. The reason was never established. There was talk of the brakes failing, that he had been too fond of speed. Peter Mrak did not actually see his father's charred face, but this did not stop him from imagining it in the evenings when he was being put to bed.

His father lingered in his memory as a voice and as movements that created noise in the small dark workshop, where Peter hung out with him. If he had been allowed to sit next to his father during that test drive, as was often the case, the accident would not have happened, Peter Mrak believed. At different stages of his life and in different seasons he would stand at that horrific bend, looking down at the beautiful trees from where, he heard, the misshapen wreck had been pulled. It was hard to believe that someone passed away in such a fine spot, reminiscent of scenes from Romantic art. Among the pine trees there was a kind of a sacral silence, as if behind the tapestry of needles another, calmer world was present from the one that human senses were able to detect.

The key ring below the steering wheel jangled. If in this information age there was something like a cell phone that could reach the underworld, he would now urgently need to consult his father, he thought. However, it would be difficult to obtain any kind of advice from a man with technical skills who did not have much to do with abstract phenomena. What could two men so different from each other, one from the mechanical world and the other from the verbal one,

really talk about? His father would certainly be astonished by the achievements in the automobile industry, he thought.

But what really ensured that Peter Mrak had a fault, if it could be called that, were the years following that event, he mused during his solitary drive, his leather-gloved hands on the steering wheel as if this was some kind of a séance. He had spent periods with his grandmother and then with the sister of his mother, who died in childbirth and who he had no memories of, knowing her only from what others told him and from photographs. Those were the years when relatives gave him gifts, pitying him, touching him and paying him attention at every step. Gradually, he developed a kind of resistance to physical proximity, to the excessive interest in him, the Christian warmth that had acquired wings that year. Ever since, it seemed as if everything to do with touch and pity announced a new catastrophe that would one day be enveloped in the silence of the pine trees.

The greasy bearing in the plastic bag jerked. As he drove past the police station opposite a hotel he had noticed, he recalled the witticism that if there is one place where your car will not get towed away, it is in front of a police station. He took a suitcase out of the trunk and a painting, wrapped in cardboard. The fog rearranged itself around his skinny body. The cold hit him in the face as his eyes slid along the narrow, lit up street. When a black cat elegantly jumped onto a dumpster, the scene made him think of *Oliver Twist*. He went through the entrance, which boasted two chipped telamons, and came to the reception area.

- Evening. A room for one night, with breakfast, please.

The tall receptionist slowly turned. He moved to the photocopier, where something was getting stuck. Meanwhile, Peter Mrak glanced at the price list and looked around the reception of the hotel that barely deserved its three stars. It was the only hotel in town that he knew the location of. Furniture from various periods had collected in the Austro-Hungarian building. The seats in the corner and the bar seemed very drab. The large crystal chandelier, which he guessed to be Hungarian, shone as the only genuine decoration. There were no guests. He thought it was a little stuffy or perhaps he was just overdressed. He put the painting on the counter, undid his coat and arranged his cap, a gift from Neža. He could still not get used to this item of clothing; it seemed to contradict his usual style.

- Here's the key. I'll return your ID card tomorrow. The elevator is on the left, you're on the third floor, the dining room is through the glass door on the right, breakfast is between seven and nine, the receptionist told him.
- I'd like to take my ID card now so that I don't forget it, Peter insisted.

- Unfortunately the photocopier isn't working. Every guest has to be registered, it's the regulations, the receptionist explained, adjusting his blue tie.

Peter Mrak grabbed his things and went upstairs in the grubby elevator. The room the same size as the bathroom, dust along the edges, no view. He took a shower, switched on the television and reflected on the reasons that had brought him here. The first one was the job interview the following day, then the landlords he had planned to visit today, but now it was clearly too late. But all these would not have been enough if Professor Viktor Eckhart was not thought to be there, who knew some of the details of Peter Mrak's life.

Everything he left behind in Ljubljana was slowly disappearing, like a train he could hear moving into the night from a platform. He put the painting in the closet. On the flickering television screen an angry crowd occupied the streets. He remembered that his last task had been to write an ad for a new political party, commissioned by the advertising agency he was working for. The party membership consisted of yuppies, in favor of change in the public administration, who in their free time went around dressed in t-shirts saying *Enough Bureaucracy*. But even after three weeks he was unable to come up with anything that would suit both the party and himself, so he left.

Early in the morning, Peter Mrak was in the dining room, where the only other guests were an Italian couple. The elegant man and his attractive companion seemed to enjoy the kind of relationship that is often the subject of TV soap operas. They somehow did not belong there. He assumed that the stale bread, the bad coffee and the fact that there was no bacon or eggs must have marred their start to the day. On a mirrored pillar, Peter Mrak noticed that the whites of his eyes were criss-crossed with red veins. Although he was in a hurry to get to the other side of the town that he knew only vaguely, the tax office building lassoed him, pulling him toward its entrance, which he had entered for the first time several months ago.

He had a few months left to settle the amount decided upon by the state, if that word could be used at all, he thought. He could not stay there long. As he crossed the main square he reflected that all his jobs were in one way or another connected with words. Only the context, length, sequence, structure and nuances changed. At some point, everything he had done since university seemed all the same to him. He walked into the building housing the regional newspaper, where the receptionist asked him for identification. Because he did not have his ID on him, he was forced to improvise. He went up to the fourth floor, walked down a long corridor and knocked on the door of the editorial office.

- Come in. I'm glad you're punctual. You're not from around here, if I'm not mistaken? said the overweight editor, in a leather chair that was too big for him. Peter thought he belonged to the silent, sunken world of his parents' generation.

- Not really. Although I know the town a little. And anyway, do you think our origins are a sufficient reason to create additional differences in a country as small as ours? asked Peter Mrak, assuming that the editor would not get the irony.
- That's so. But are you sure this is the right job for you? You have the references, but what really counts here is effectiveness. I'd expect that after all you've done you'd find this job boring, said the editor, scrutinizing him, while Peter Mrak listened to a woman's footsteps in the corridor.
- I've always been interested in culture. I should be alright for a while, he insisted, thinking about all the things he had not included in his resume. Certain details and experience would be a hindrance rather than an advantage, he had assumed.
- I suggest you give it a try for a month and then you'll see what you want to do, said the editor.
- Great.
- The work is dynamic and your co-workers will help you.

In Peter's head this statement rang false. He was as weary of such promises as his fellow citizens were mistrustful of tax returns, of the promises given by the left-wing, the right-wing and the in-between politicians. He also found himself in an unpleasant situation with regard to trust when he thought of his acquaintances, friends and former colleagues. This is how a person feels who has to earn money not through groveling, but with enough calculation so as not to become a slave to a paycheck or even the growing poverty; a person who must walk somehow in the middle, a path well-trodden by many others, he thought.

The man in front of him knew no peace. All Peter could say about him was what he had read online the day before. He had skimmed a few of the man's articles, which he found hopeless and trivial. This was something he always did, check things before tackling them. The editor's size still surprised Peter, because everything else about the man was somehow in line with his expectations. Peter followed him along the corridor to a small office, where an uninspiring salary was finally mentioned. Peter Mrak's throat constricted.

- Of course it's not strictly necessary that you're here three times a week. It depends on what you arrange with your co-workers. You can start tomorrow.
- Tomorrow?

Outside, in front of a bank, there was a small placard-carrying crowd of people who looked as if they had lost the will to live; this was another job that would not be in line with his ideas, he thought. But there was nothing better in sight and his costs were growing, in spite of him having no family. It would be impossible to get off the rusty ship sailing through the winter without

paying interest, he thought. He would not borrow money, not even from Neža. He would have to wait patiently for a better opportunity to appear, if the word opportunity carried its dictionary meaning in an environment like this. Peter Mrak wrapped himself in his coat, put his hands in his pockets and lowered his head. As he stoically stood in line in another bank, looking at the other faces, which seemed to have common traits, as if they were all from the same family, the teller's eyes were lost in numbers. The hands of the clock above her head added another minute to the age of the town, where he had to continue his life as if it had only just begun.

## 2.

Snow and ice were advancing across the plains and hills. Peter Mrak was driving along the highway in the opposite direction to the heavy traffic. The Alps were reaching for a blueness that did not seem to belong to this world. The darkness of the tunnels interrupted the voices on the radio, where protests were mentioned in one way or another, or invitations to protest. It seemed that the dissatisfaction that had been buried away in these parts of the world was emerging. He had still not thrown away the worn bearing the mechanic had so carefully wrapped in a plastic bag. It somehow distracted Peter's attention from his hunger. He was one of those who find driving relaxing, he thought as he accelerated. The sun was already setting when he parked by the River Ljubljanica and walked to the town center. In a bar in front of the municipal offices he found Neža. Her tiny hands were wrapped tightly around a tea cup.

- So you're not going to change your mind? she enquired as her hand slid across her hair, fastened with a hair grip.
- Not really, he said, noticing a bottle of *Dior* in her half open handbag.

Initially, his brown eyed companion seemed energetic. As always, her pupils darted from one object to another, while her spirit, if this term can be used for someone in real estate, was constantly focused. When with her, he had a feeling that things were moving, sometimes sliding over the edge. What is bothersome can sometimes be attractive. There were moments when she threw at him too many questions, suggestions, travel ideas and opportunities, as if they knew each other for years. He often found himself in a position where he put a brake on her intentions, he thought. Now, in spite of the unpredictability in his life, he could discern that in her voice and gestures something was missing, and at the same time there was too much of something else. A kind of discomfort coming from her reactions, concentrated in the way she held the teaspoon from which honey was dribbling.

- How long do you intend to stay in Ljubljana? she asked, adjusting the bracelet that he knew she had got from a friend.
- Actually, I mean to leave right now.
- But if you get that job at the university you'll have to come back. You know my apartment is half empty. You could stay there. And there are more opportunities here.
- Thanks. I'll think about it. Until things are clear, I'll work for the newspaper.
- Newspaper?
- Yes, a few weeks ago I replied to that ad I told you about. And to my surprise I got it.

- Great. But it's so far. Of course, you could commute from here.
- I slept in a hotel yesterday.
- In a hotel?
- My car was playing up and it was too late to drive back in all that snow. But then I didn't even pay.
- Are you totally broke?
- No, problems with my card.
- Why didn't you ring me and I could've paid with mine?
- I didn't think of that.
- Which hotel?
- The Slovenia. It looks like I'll be staying there today as well if I want to turn up for work tomorrow.
- You can sleep here.
- Who knows how long the journey will take tomorrow morning with the snow.

Events were rapidly heading in an unexpected direction and at times he felt that someone else was moving the pieces. He was gliding along a wet road to the other side of town in order to pay the last installment of his rent. Once again, something was telling him that there was no longer any point persevering in the capital. He took what was left of his things from the apartment. Fat white snowflakes were drifting down and the traffic was getting slower. Although Peter Mrak had been striving for years to surround himself only with the bare essentials, he was surprised at how much junk there was in his station wagon. As Ljubljana disappeared behind him, he had a feeling that he was still there. Sometime between his childhood and that day his life had happened, he thought. He had lived in many places, including abroad. Seasons quickly changed. He grew up, finished university, traveled and lost his youth.

His jobs, whatever they were, changed. People, bad and good, appeared and then disappeared again. Relationships came and went. But the miles behind him and the arches beneath the viaducts of his life did not seem like stretches of a single long road, rather of the opportunities he missed. He somehow found his feet wherever he stopped, but never felt really at home. However, he did not regret anything in particular, since adapting, changing environment and people was a part of him. He was aware that there was a certain expectation in connection with this, even the shifting of a burden.

The same receptionist awaited him at the hotel. When Peter Mrak stepped onto his balcony, the stars were twinkling in the sky. He lit a cigarette and thought of Viktor, who was evidently somewhere in this town. Had he moved yet? And why here, to this small town that was only a mirror image of other smaller towns in the country, filled with hills and the Alps, interrupted by valleys? Viktor was the sort of person to whom genuineness was essential. In his last letter he said only that he was returning here from Vienna, soon. It's ridiculous that someone like Viktor does not have a cell phone or email, Peter thought. In the past he called Viktor a number of times, but there was no answer. Viktor could have got in touch, but clearly he did not feel any



need for contact. However, Viktor was one of those people it was difficult to bear a grudge against for anything, he thought.

His laptop on the small table was bleeping. He was not tired enough to go to bed. When he went out to collect himself, his thoughts revolved around walking. He could not remember when he had come here for the first time. It was with his grandmother and father; a few times he came with Ana and they walked along the streets that at the time appeared even drearier. However, then the gray facades of the unrenovated houses had not been disturbing. Once they ran toward the castle above the eastern part of the town. How long ago was that? Years, he thought as snow fell from a pine tree in the park. He found himself in front of a church and saw a statue of Moses he judged to be from the eighteenth century.

- Peter! he heard behind him.

He turned toward a group of people and recognized among them a face he had not seen in a long time. The man's altered facial features were a proof the years' invisible passage.

- Mirt?
- Yes. Hell, you know I've always lived here. I recognized you by the way you move. What brings you here? asked Mirt.
- Job interview, said Peter Mrak, at the same time coming closer and moving round a sheltering corner.
- So you're no longer in the capital?
- No, it looks like you and I are going to share our living space.
- Fucking awesome.

The relief of bumping into a colleague from university did not last long. On the contrary, for Peter Mrak was starting a stock take of his life. Mirt, who was now introducing him to his friends, had retained an expression of innocence. It was difficult to say that he had changed in any way, except the fact that he had put on weight. He was more solidly built, Peter's height, but more erect. In his gestures there had always been a kind of aloofness, interrupted by jokiness and sarcasm. His glossy hairdo with sideburns intentionally emphasized his otherwise messy appearance, while his unshaven face introduced a note of roughness. Like some other details, this was fully premeditated, Peter thought. He wondered how many golf balls he had holed since they last met. He could see within a single moment how Mirt's time had passed and wondered whether Mirt could see through him as well.

- For a while we called him the cynical lyricist, Mirt told the others.
- And he was called the young Einstein, because of his hair, said Peter after general laughter.
- We were pretty wild then. Tell me, are you and Ana still together? asked Mirt.
- No, I haven't seen her in a while.
- She was sharp. She had us all under control. Let me introduce Jana. Let's go inside.

Mirt and Peter were at the bar counter while the others sat around a table.

- So you were school friends? said the pale Jana, coming closer.
- We hung out together for a time, and then ... Peter Mrak began.
- Let's have another round. Put it on the tab, Mirt said impatiently.
- Are you still working in the museum? asked Peter.
- Yes, I soon got promoted. And you?
- Different things. The last one in an advertising agency.
- Well, well, who'd have thought it? Aren't you a writer anymore?
- That's my afternoon job.
- That's how it is now. Another beer, for my mate here! called Mirt.
- Are you in touch with the old crowd? asked Peter.
- The last person I saw was Rok. He'd just returned from the psychiatric ward. Schizophrenia, threats to the neighbors and similar, I heard.
- Rok? Unbelievable.
- The coolest ones are the first to succumb. Where do you live?
- I'm actually looking for a place.

There would be no point in explaining the details to Mirt, since he was in some other winter that did not belong to this galaxy, thought Peter. Mirt was one of those people who form their character in their twenties and then fail to develop it any further. Regardless of their former friendship, the person that stood in front of him was the product of sun beds, massages and boutiques. What they once shared was no longer. Mirt's playfulness, style of dress and vocabulary remained at the teenage level and many meeting him would have doubts about his academic title. Around the table, among the group of unmarried individuals with their young person's way of thinking, with university degrees or more, it was becoming more lively. Most of them did not appear all that youthful. Peter realized they were strolling leisurely through life, relying on safe conversations while sipping hot chocolate and smoothies, philosophizing about cosmetics and digital gadgets.

- You've got to come with us to the other side of town, there's dancing there, said Jana.
- Hm. Isn't it the middle of the week? said Peter, looking at her and thinking that she must be a lot younger than him and Mirt.

The alcohol circled around his system with increasing speed. At one time Mirt and he would persist in this way and rounds would follow one after the other. But now something thick was solidifying inside him. He pushed his beer to the middle of the table. Outside, along the old walls, slid the shadows of people walking home, somewhere that Peter Mrak had not known for quite a while. He thought that even home was often a fictitious notion, for he had lived in so many places and with so many different people that it would be difficult to call the sum of them home, only individual shelters, appearing at various points in his life, where sometimes emotions were more important and at other times reason, the two forces that every adult is always trying to balance, willingly or not.

This was the first mature phase of life that demanded adaptation, like a deity demands from a believer a ritual or sacrifice, and he saw nothing strange in that, just a necessity that enabled him to enact himself and acquire the status of a person. He thought that Mirt had never had it difficult and always managed somehow, ever since he had taken on the management of the museum, in spite of the fact that he was as a person less flexible. This town was the only ecosystem in which he could function and his skill was obedience to all those who opened doors for him, thought Peter.

- So are you coming along? asked Mirt.
- Maybe another time.
- Shame. Give me your number, I'll call you.

The cold outside woke Peter up. At the top of the hill the dark outline of the demolished castle could be seen. From the street, the cat sitting by a lit up window on the fourth floor of an old house looked like a person. As Peter quietly walked past the receptionist napping over an open newspaper, the crystal chandelier threw a sharp light into his eyes. Like a caged animal he kept turning in his bed for quite some time.

## 3.

- Mr. Mrak, your stay with us has been paid for, the receptionist surprised him in the morning even before he reached the door of the breakfast room.

- Sorry?

- Yes, until the end of the month, explained the receptionist.

- Is that so?

- And if you wish, you may move to a bigger room. Here's your ID card.

Automatically, he reached for the card and put it in his pocket. This must be Neža's doing, she was obviously worried and settled the bill for the whole week.

- We wish you a pleasant stay. Are you here on business? asked the receptionist, smiling.
- Something like that.
- If you have a car, you can park it at the back, in our parking area, said the receptionist, putting his arms behind his back.

Peter Mrak went to the breakfast room, where he saw the Italian couple again. They kept chatting and waving their hands around. When he passed by them, their eyes met and he detected the smell of cologne. He finished his breakfast quickly. Still tasting the bad coffee, he moved his car to the hotel car park and set off for the newspaper. He showed the receptionist, who was reading a magazine, his ID card.

- Are you sure this is your ID? asked the receptionist, giving it back nonchalantly.

When Peter looked closely, he saw the name Antonio Caputi. He had no trouble recognizing the photograph of the man he had seen in the breakfast room. The man from Milan was only a fraction older than he. As so often happens in tricky situations, when a trivial matter brings up other issues, the careless hotel receptionist now set off in Peter an avalanche of dissatisfaction that had nothing to do with the wrong ID card and had been within him before they ever met.

- There's been a mistake through no fault of mine, he said, offering the man his driving license.
- There's no need. You're still on the list from yesterday.

The office was empty. The chairs were scattered around the desks in no particular order. He turned on a computer and found the number of his hotel.

- Good morning, Hotel Slovenia, manager speaking, said the voice on the other end of the line.
- This is Peter Mrak, I'm one of your guests. Your staff are completely dysfunctional, the receptionist gave me the wrong ID card.
- Really? When was this?
- Half an hour ago. I now have the ID card that belongs to Antonio Caputi.
- My apologies, we'll sort the matter out straight away. I'll redirect you.

The phone rang with long pauses. Peter angrily put it down and stared at the building site below, then checked the email from the editor. He forwarded the files to his personal address. He had always done this in order to avoid spending too much time in offices. Whenever possible, he did his work elsewhere. No one opened the door, only now and again he heard voices and footsteps. Soon after Peter Mrak, following instructions and without any real enthusiasm, had drawn up an events listing, he found himself in a nearby library. He did not last long in any of the sections. He just happened to pick up a book about the Mediterranean, which he could swear Ana had read.

At one time, mornings would be different and he and Ana would come to the bay. There were many islands nearby. They would lie there, gazing at the horizon, until it was too hot and then they would enter the blue sea. An abbot would appear by the cathedral and soon they would all find themselves on a staircase, having a long conversation about medieval mysticism and architecture, something that the book in Peter's hands did not mention. In an empty square she would say something like *the clouds are quickly vanishing*. Oh, summers. Whatever Ana said would attract his attention and make him alert. He would not be thinking like today and the words in themselves would not mean much, because what mattered was the way they were said. However prosaic or meaningful, they said more than he was able to achieve with them today, he thought.

Even if he looked at parchments that had turned to ashes, seeking wise thoughts and verses, if he reached far back into history, crawled along cobweb-hung corridors where he would come across executioners, mysterious and miraculous formulae, not understood by the writers of holy texts, thoughts into which even ghosts, let alone skillful hackers, could not break, not one of those writings could have the same effect on him as even the simplest, most modest word uttered

by her then, he thought. He did not want to idealize what had passed, but it crawled inside him. Outside, the wind swayed the deformed trees. He felt relief and put the book back. Lately, he no longer borrowed books. Once, he had five library membership cards and now not one. And even if he wanted to, he could not join this library today because, according to his ID, he was Antonio Caputi. When he read, he liked to sit in the reading room. He was so used to this that he no longer searched for the reasons for this unusual preference, which had nothing to do with fear.

He certainly did not want anyone to know which books he was borrowing, just as he did not want anyone to form a stereotyped idea of him based on this kind of data. People are more than willing to form a wrong impression about you and do not change it easily. At the thought that someone might have access to the list of books that he borrowed, he felt discomfort. He assumed that these days a company or state could make good use of such information and that the only purpose of digital records was greater control over the individual. What was happening in the streets around the country could only present an additional worry, he thought. The books he had borrowed recently were not on the bestseller or award-winning lists, he had always been attracted more by books in dark corners. After a while, he reached the conclusion that the quality of books on the shelves of this small country was in inverse proportion to many other things.

In fact, society had never pushed to the forefront those books that would help people reflect or arouse a desire to stand on the edge. Even when they were claimed to be revolutionary, they were in fact bland items that obscured the essence. But books that were initially pushed into invisible places and surfaced later are no longer understandable to the new age. In this sense, every age was totalitarian, he concluded. He began to interpret this kind of thinking, which was in contrast to something that could not simply be called brain washing, as a form of mental irritation, against which it was difficult to act. If someone tried to disagree with him, it would be hard not to resist. But there was no one around for such conversations. When a librarian slipped behind his back he knew that he had nothing in common with this person – who had at the age of twenty strayed into an unremarkable town, which even the cranes on the building sites could not lift out of its grayness, a person who, like a heretic, spent evenings carrying Doré's *Bible* out of storage and in the morning, like everyone when the new day begins, again began assembling hopes in the children's books department – except the fact that they happened to find themselves in the same place.

## 4.

He spent a little longer in the newspaper department. He read only the facts and put the material back on the shelf. He checked a few advertisements for one-room apartments, but all the rents seemed too high. Just before he reached for the latest issue of a well-known magazine, he sensed someone looking at him. The stranger smiled and waved, as if they knew each other.

- Fancy meeting here after such a long time. What a coincidence, and just now, when I'm reading your book. I'm on chapter six, said the middle-aged man, getting up.

Peter Mrak rushed up and down the ladders of his memory, but could not find a suitable reply. He assumed the man must be some local weirdo. He was surprised that even after a thorough search, he could not identify him. There is nothing more awkward than meeting a reader who wishes to talk to an author at an inappropriate time, he thought. Discreetly he glanced at the man's membership card on the table. Janez M., it said.

- Can I invite you for a drink? asked the gray bearded man into the silence of reading.
- At the moment ...
- It's best if we talk outside so as not to disturb others, said the man, picking up his things from the table. Chapter four only partly indicates what is going to happen later. I like the fact that it's not too revealing. A good writer conceals his best cards until the end, he began to whisper as he moved alongside Peter.
- I don't know, really.
- Since I don't work anymore, I read more, explained Janez M. and led him to the nearest café, while Peter Mrak was still scouring his memory. I saw you on television the other day when you were explaining about ...
- I don't remember being in front of the camera.
- But you were, it was your face and voice. Unless you have a double, said Janez M., laughing.
- A double? Everyone probably has a physical double, but inside we're all unique.
- That's true, said the man and turned his attention to a young waiter who was scuttling away. Your writing is complex, but I find chapter six of crucial importance.

- I can no longer remember what's in it. I'm not the sort of writer who knows his text by heart. When they're finished, I forget them, said Peter.
- How can you not remember? It's the chapter where the main character finds out that in a few months he will lose his memory, said the man.
- Oh yes. What is it you do again? asked Peter at last, convinced that the man could not be from this region, judging by his accent.
- As you know, I've worked on lexicons quite a lot. I still create the odd entry, but not very often. Otherwise I enjoy myself as much as a retired person can. He gave a diabolical smile.
- That's rare. Most seniors don't say that these days.
- When you get older, a lot changes. Time stretches disproportionately, like a broken spring. Today, for example, I'm wondering who is taking care of serious literature in this country? he said and looked at the provocatively dressed brunette sitting opposite them.
- You won't find an actual group of people doing that. In today's chaos no one owns it. Peter looked in the same direction and his eyes settled on the woman's yellow phone.
- Everything today is owned or controlled by someone, even the things that are said to be the most inalienable. Literature is in the hands of the aspiring middle class. It's a kind of compensation for the wealth that this social class still envies the elite.
- Hm. I'm not sure that the middle class still exists. Do you think that the higher class does not enjoy real literature and the lower class has no time to read? Social status is not a pre-condition for a good writer, Peter observed, following the movement of the beautiful woman's legs.
- Exactly. But when the middle class merges with the higher class, it is no longer interested in literature. Did you really think that the rich read books? No, they just keep them on their shelves as a status symbol and a false sign of culture. Publicly, they talk about books as if they were holy objects, calling them an indispensable intellectual good. But in reality they see them as no more than a market commodity, of no more value than bricks. Authors are no longer important, they are just consumer goods. Literature is suspicious, just like that beauty over there. There's no way of knowing whether she's a prostitute or a lady. But regardless of the truth, I'd give a lot for her, he said with a smile and sank into silence.
- That's a rather clichéd comparison, Peter let slip.
- Can we expect something new from you soon?
- No, I have no time. All I have are a few drafts.



- Well, there's no hurry. What matters is that a person is happy, said Janez, finishing his drink.

The conversation was a distraction from the state that had enveloped him in the library. He was in the street again, where he felt freest, walking, which softened his body. Wrapped in his own thoughts, he was making his way toward the shopping mall. Perhaps the only purpose of that accidental meeting – if such encounters had a purpose – was to bring him down to earth, he thought. Was he happy? What is happiness? Answers vanished like arrows in the fog. Wondering about happiness is even more bothersome than the sound of the pages turning of the self-improvement books that were filling the bookshop windows around the country and abroad. Examining one's own capacity for happiness and following instructions is so misguided, he thought.

Along the road offering a view of the surrounding hills, he vividly imagined a morning in some other hills. Those final visits during the tension of their last year, when the August air absorbed the humidity and arranged things in such a way that their edges were perfectly clear. It was necessary to go through the beech grove, where Ana said: *There's a pond*. Below their waists swayed a field of wheat. They would sit beneath a tree, feeling hot, and while Ana grumpily cleaned her skirt, the pond would surround them with birches admiring their necks on its surface. They would sit on the bench, listening to the sound of the water and the invasive insects. A fisherman would appear nearby, cast his line and pull out a trout, adding it to the rest of his catch. The sound of the shaking of head and tail, travelling around the pond, would finally fade. He would look at Ana, whose mouth would be forming the question: *Why?*

A large revolving door pushed Peter among real-time people and noises, if real-time exists for those sensitive to the shades between the past and the future. He did not feel good in glass temples, where likeable music bored the sales assistants and the shy cleaners, where screens showed celebrities and perfumeries covered the aged skin of the rich and uncovered the poverty of the poor, while the apathetic youth met in the crowded bars. As in most buildings of this kind in various places on earth, there was a great deal of shoving without any big ideas. A person must go round, left and right when looking for a few small things in a large space, he thought, searching for a toothbrush. After paying, he went on toward the fountain and collapsed. Looking at the windows, he thought it was not possible that he had come to a store alone. Of course he did not expect Ana, he did not even know where she was. Months were layered on as in amber and the insect in the middle could not be scratched out.

Here, he reflected, where he sat, he could be disturbed by an egocentric historian, who would declare the spot beneath him to be part of the Amber Route between the Baltic and the Adriatic. Neža, with whom he was on the border between friendship and something that would be difficult to describe as a relationship, had to be home by now, but even she was on this route that had been very significant in the distant past. Perhaps the petrified resin of Cambrian trees

was available in some perverted form in the jewelry store that Peter Mrak watched a woman and child enter. All this is part of a story about reselling, be it bought objects or individual souls or nations, he thought. This must be one of those Saturdays when he and Neža would visit stores separately, he would go and buy CDs and she would visit a hairdresser. Then they would meet again at an arranged time.

So this long emptiness that kept him by the fountain could be one of her delays that had never irritated him too much. If there was something like an invisible eye watching above the massive construction of the shopping mall, reaching higher than the winter, so that it could monitor the network of tracks and roads, it would uncover the fact that such a meeting could happen only in Ljubljana. Had he ever had a better proof of how similar shopping malls are? The different goods that had always circled between Trieste and Saint Petersburg were still being smuggled along the highways, even the one that ran not far from Peter Mrak, and it seemed that the gap between the centuries, those fictitious linear formations the experts like to argue about, was equal to the negligible distance between two resting places.

## 5.

Every time there was a rustle of paper in Peter Mrak's office, light spread along the streets. Even he could connect this coinciding of interior and exterior with routine. The first thing he came across this particular morning was Mirt's invitation for a drink, including a link to join a political party. This irritated him and forced him to think. Mirt had discarded freedom, if there was any point at all in using this term within a radius of a hundred and fifty miles, and trampled on it as soon as he stuck the mantra *Yes, we can* on his forehead, a slogan that some rotund man, sunk into his chair, spent weeks trying to come up with and then in the end, despairing at his lack of innovativeness, called the student employment agency, which hired a philosophy student for a pittance, who then one night copied a two thousand year old Taoist text.

Two weeks later, this idea was in the account of the agency that he had worked for, worth high praise, fifteen Hugo Boss shirts and five *all inclusive* stays for six people in the luxury Kempinski Hotel, where none of the guests ever saw either the balcony or the beach that was a two-minute walk away. The connection between the slogan, which Peter just happened to know the origin of, and what Mirt had become seemed absurd. But that is how things were these days. That was the source of the differences that were getting wider, like the ground after an earthquake, uncontrollably separating two groups of people so that they were shifting further and further apart, and would meet again only when an avalanche uncovered them.

While, cup in hand, he stared at Mirt's email, the vulture his eye had spotted did not flap its wings. It was descending in circles from high up, approaching the industrial part of the town and then continuing in a diagonal toward the building of the editorial office as if, discarded by the gray clouds, it was giving off signals saying that freedom could not be constructed. Now Peter Mrak was looking at the building site or the *workers' theatre*, as one of his co-workers called it. He claimed that between the town hall and the editorial office a new shopping mall was being built. As it was lunchtime, the workers were emerging from their holes.

It occurred to him how it would be if he was in their shoes and looking at someone sitting in his place. He had experienced how it is to work with your hands, marked and bleeding from concrete and steel, muscles tense, body tired as you collapse into your bed in the evening like a felled tree. Before starting university he had worked on a building site for a few weeks. The furrowed faces appeared to him as one, only the figures, young and old, tall and short, round and thin, created the individuality beneath the awkward, stained overalls, wreathed in cigarette smoke that was sucked up by the wind that scratched at their eyeballs.

The figures raising a wall that had become their property, that could not be taken home by anyone, a wall into which they had fixed themselves with concrete and to which they returned like believers, halted for a moment. The wall cast a cool shadow and silence on their backs. The workers had to be skillful so that what they were constantly building upon did not tremble and shake their hopes or crush a minute of their break, measured as exactly as the distances between

the walls. Sounds, tools and what went on at the building site were their everyday reality, like his was sitting in an office. There was an immoral relationship between those arranging lines of text, taking them from the internet, attaching them to new programs and then disseminating them around the world wide web of hidden interest, and those that were banging steel pillars into the ground.

But it seemed that both were monitored by someone who had lost control over what was happening. His fingers automatically ran across the keyboard. The article about the latest theater performance was not quite finished. Halted in the middle of a sentence. The finished events listing was in another attachment. He thought his work only made sense because of the numbers, although he did not know whether they would be erased. Efficiency. Productivity. Although at a different level, he was again part of the market. Nonetheless, things were being subtracted and the hands on the clock were moving the debt Peter Mrak was supposed to pay back.

Something similar was spreading around the whole country. Wherever he looked, whatever he read or listened to, with whoever he spoke, there was always something that could be described as debt. Everyone owed something to someone that it would not be possible to pay back. And in the case of those that were paying back, it was received by a third person, who was above all this. The debtors were paying back and saving at one level or another, particularly those who had nothing. He went over to the window, where he could hear the shouts and laughter of the workers echoing around the skeleton of the new building. On the screen next to his there was the website of an eminent French newspaper, describing stock exchange abstractions. The bird approached and its shadow fell among the workers, standing in the deep light, passing cigarettes and plastic cups to one another. Then they slowly dispersed. In their veins there was a kind of a musical murmur of those who split the first rock and constructed pyramids, temples and cathedrals.

It struck him that it was insolent to just stand there, waiting to fill the emptiness with cultural phenomena while spying on the workers. He also recognized something ruthless in his gesture of picking up Heym's book in order to find aesthetic satisfaction and underline something that had not changed: *Their eyes wander across the bare space, looking for a field and a tree, but come up against only a white wall.* The book was one of four he had put on the shelf above his desk. When he turned off the computer he knew that his worries were very small compared to what was happening outside. The vulture flapped its wings, troubled by the noise of the machinery and the clanking of metal when Peter Mrak rushed into the street thinking how today the only certainty is uncertainty.

The glass chandelier in the hotel once more tinkled with something that overshadowed the real world, although the cause of the shadow could not be identified with any of the physical shapes up there.

## 6.

Standing in the wind, looking for Mirt's surname, he was not sure that the house number of the new building was the right one. The entrance door was ajar. His doubt lasted until he walked along the bright corridor, climbed the stairs and heard a voice somewhere above him:

- Did you have any problem finding us?
- Not really. A nice building. Is the apartment yours?
- No, it's the museum's.
- I didn't know the state still gave its employees things like that.
- This is only temporary. My brother is living with our parents on the edge of town.
- Are you alone?
- At the moment, Jana spends half her time here and half at her parents'. Come in and make yourself comfortable. I'll get drinks. We had a party yesterday, as you can see.
- Quite a lot of empty bottles and cigarette ash.
- What else is there to do during this fucking winter?
  
- Yes, it's very cold.

The modern, office-like furniture dominated the living room and kitchen, which together created a huge, cube-like room, in the middle of which there was a red, almost clinically designed three-piece suite, with a rug of muddy green, all with the final effect of absorbing the visitor and sucking him in, even if he had no intention of sitting down. The artificial volumes, chrome and aluminum created a geometry of clear shapes, as if the whole room was some kind of a post-modernist installation. From the point where Peter Mrak was standing, it was possible to make out through high glass surfaces the twinkling of the lights of the town. The whole impression, including the abstract prints symmetrically decorating the white walls, was as if the objects were only temporary and replaceable, without the added value that only the caring touch of a human hand can create. He found it difficult to imagine that the Impressionist painting in the closet of his hotel room could hang on those walls. The leather sofa where he sat was smooth and cold, the lights recessed in the ceiling poured light around so that everything looked heightened.

- I thought you weren't coming. What's going on with you? asked Mirt, returning with two cans of beer.
- Nothing new. I'm just getting used to the place, said Peter and thought how much he could really say on the subject.
- So you've found somewhere to live. And the newspaper job?
- It's alright.
- Are you following what's going on here? Mirt lit a cigarette.

- Not really.
- All the intellectuals are already on the streets or getting ready to demonstrate. Those that think are resisting the system. An intellectual recognizes a critical situation and stands in the middle of it. Intellectuals must protect the people and fight for them.
- The people? Do you think that what's happening is really the will of the people? said Peter doubtfully, surprised at the direction the conversation had taken.
- Certainly. Just remember how loud the masses were the last time. And how loud they will be.
- Why aren't the workers out there, the ones living in holes all over town, or people from godforsaken villages?
- The uneducated are not capable of assessing the situation. We are called to protest on their behalf.
- Do you think that anything will change if things collapse?
- Of course. After the cleansing, a period of great optimism will start. Trust in values will return, said Mirt with a smile.
- Optimism?
- You can't achieve change even on the personal level if you don't have a vision. The same applies to society. Don't you remember the texts by Marx, Rosa Luxemburg and the others we used to read?

Peter Mrak got up and reached for the cigarettes. He lit one and watched their smoke slowly combine into a lazy snake. Outside, it was completely dark and the line of traffic on the main artery into town was stationary. Like a cat, Mirt sat easily in an armchair, watching Peter. Peter looked at his white shirt and then at his own jeans, torn at the knees. He could not remember where and when he bought them. He thought how Mirt was still sticking to the rule that you have to change clothes frequently. Even when they were still young, Mirt was trying to convince him that when it came to clothes there was a rule that you have to combine the cheapest and most expensive trademarks and then change them like a chameleon. The end result was always the same – Mirt created an impression of being in fancy dress. But he kept to the middle way, just right, so as not to arouse suspicion about homoerotic tendencies or deter women.

For people like Mirt, this was only a part of their fashion strategy, assumed Peter. But Mirt frequently changed everything else besides his clothes. He got tired after three strokes of the tennis racket and played the game only for reasons of style. Mirt would light a cigarette only to look decadent. He never bought a car. He liked to spice up a conversation with statements about how much he had spent on his coat in New York, on his shoes in Brussels and on his t-shirt in Sarajevo. Peter thought how the Balkan iconography in particular always lent itself to easy

conversation and was suitable for immigrants. It relaxed groups of people with different requirements and made them laugh. Peter Mrak remembered that not one Carnival fancy dress party would go by in the capital without Mirt appearing in his Stalin uniform, and he never explained where it came from. Oh, how silly, Peter almost whispered and took a sip of the beer.

- Yes, I remember. I don't know why, but Luther's text about freedom stuck in my mind the most. But when an idea becomes reality, many things can go wrong. It's easy to talk about nice ideas. Many people change their coats, like those young poets in Vienna who returned from exciting recitals to the villas of their parents and then the next evening again appeared on stage in order to imitate socialism and its derivations. And now you're saying that the time has come to realize new ideas? Peter could not stop himself.
- It's a fact that we're heading for direct democracy. That was the wish of the greats, Mirt said in a lower voice and stubbed out his cigarette.
- Another term coined by sociologists. So why don't you start your own party?
- There's no need, for the time being. You have to be careful. Political parties are washed out. People don't fall for them anymore. You have to wait for the right moment. Maybe in a few months ... Now we must act from the background. I don't know why we should wait any longer. There's the civil society and you could be a part of it.
- How?
- The internet offers various options, said Mirt.
- Struggling with this seems like something for the workers at the building site. It's suffocating and raises a lot of dust.
- Of course, many bloggers are paid. Do you know our website?
- Vaguely. So you're suggesting I should write blogs?
- Not at all. I'm only trying to wake you up a little. You could join us with more serious writing or with statements, anything. Every opinion, every vote counts. The more often something appears, the more real it becomes, insisted Mirt.
- A revolution won't bring results.
- You're mistaking causes for effects. There will be a turnaround when the government falls and with it, all the useless politicians.
- As far as I can see, what will happen is that some people will swap seats.
- Have faith! Can we watch a film together?
- No, I've got to go.
- You can stay the night. There's plenty of room, as you can see.
- Not today.



## 7.

As the morning traffic got denser, Peter Mrak was sitting in an armchair in the reception, thinking about the university provision thanks to which he did not get employment. His intention of going to the dining room and asking at reception whether Caputi had returned the ID card had faded. Although he did not have the letter on him, since the news was given to him by a secretary, it was no less obvious that he had lost the battle. He increasingly believed that the only sensible thing was to persevere in his newspaper job. What lay between those decaying walls, in the town that was more Mirt's than his, was becoming reality. A narrowing. There was no point filing a complaint, it would be like giving Ariadne's thread to a minotaur. Before he ended up in the hotel he found out in a telephone conversation with an acquaintance that there was an instruction in place to reject all the applications. Even though many fulfilled all the conditions, this or that commission would always send strange letters via officials, until it finally explained that it could decide on its own, regardless of the rules.

Hell! Where had all the hours gone? He remembered Korenčič, who had taken care that things went the way they did. How exactly he did that, Peter did not know, but the net that was being woven and rumored since he sent his application, received an epilogue. He could see the professor with the crooked nose, who perceived art with a ruler and who in ten years at the department had not managed to publish anything sensible, sitting carefree in his office, even though he was perhaps not really there at that moment. Then he also remembered the night he returned to Ana's flat and saw Korenčič's check jacket on the coat hanger. This was before he had any reason to accuse him of rumor-mongering or harassment. Nothing would have changed if he had called Korenčič and yelled at him. The only thing that might have helped would have been to hit him. But with that, he would only demonstrate that he was upset. He wanted to sit in his car, drive to the capital and take revenge on that skillful, insect-like caricature. When a rotten individual stands in the way of a person who is trying to reach a goal via a normal procedure, the latter is left only with the option of taking a similar course of action.

While his mind told him that he could do more to achieve his goal, his judgment was under scrutiny. What was he really doing? Walking from one office to another, from one professor to another, getting on well with the students. Even while applying, he sensed that the system was constructed in such a way that everyone considered themselves responsible, but those that answered the phone did not feel so. It was always necessary to call someone else, who would then tell him to contact yet another person, all the way to the dean, who would once more direct him to Korenčič. Procedures. The rustle of paper in offices. Heads nodding and shaking. Smiles and sharp looks. Suppressed aggression. Left-wing and right-wing opinion. Who is in this or that party, who is going out with whom, who is publishing in this or that journal, and similar mutterings. A confirmation of something he could have understood earlier. But hope dies last and he was like everyone who wants to advance. Neither then nor now would it have helped if



Alexander's horses awoke and galloped down the sad 'halls of knowledge'. He went to his room, where the phone was ringing.

- Mr. Mrak, this is the manager. I'm calling about your ID card, said the voice.
- What about it?
- We take full responsibility for the mishap. But Antonio Caputi is no longer in town.
- Where is he?
- We don't know. We do have his data. We've contacted him, but he's not replying.
- And?
- He's probably on his way home. We've informed him in writing about the ID cards being swapped. What can we do for you?
- Sort out the problem now.
- Could you leave his ID card in reception so we send it to him?
- No way. When I get mine, you'll get his.
- How long are you staying with us? We'll give you a discount.
- I don't know, I'm looking for an apartment. Certainly a few more days.
- You can stay until you sort out your accommodation.
- What do you mean?
- We have a few rooms for our regular guests. In view of the situation, I can offer you a room free of charge.
- I see. You're saying I can stay for free?
- That's right, Mr. Mrak. You can stay all winter, as far as I'm concerned. But I'd ask for this to stay between the two of us.
- Don't you think that the ID card situation should be reported to the police? Who knows what Caputi is involved in?
- It's a delicate situation. But only reputable guests stay in our hotel. I'm sure the matter will be resolved this month. We'll let you know when there's any news.

He put down the receiver. What an unusual conversation and a no less strange offer, he thought. He felt dizzy and had to lie down. On the ceiling he spotted a spider, rapidly lowering itself. When he blew at it, the spider began quickly climbing up again and attached itself to the ceiling. It bothered him that he would not be able to pay his debts and that gradually they would try to get his car, his only possession. In fact, that moment was not far off. The only thing separating him from it was this room, this dysfunctional hotel with no real guests, this town that was beginning to enclose him among its moldy walls. He got up and surfed the internet to find something about Caputi. It took a while to find the right one and he discovered that he had a store in the center of Milan, selling watches.

The spider continued its trek across the ceiling on its fragile legs, while Peter went down to reception. The receptionist already knew about the unusual offer. Together they climbed to the top floor and entered a large fresh-looking room. It contained a big double bed, a desk in the corner, a tall wooden closet and a long brass mirror, in which he could see his faint figure. With its view over the whole of the town, the room was quite pleasant. It resembled an old-fashioned studio without a kitchen. Within an hour, his things were arranged around the space that he paced out as more than 400 square feet. Then there was the bathroom. Like an animal that wants to feel safe and finds a quiet corner in a tree or a burrow, like every individual, with or without a home, thinking or not thinking, after Peter became better connected with the room, he placed the armchair next to the window, where he felt moderately well. He decided that under the circumstances, for the time being there was no point looking for an apartment.