

The Floral Shirt

We gradually become accustomed to our delusions. If we are not too ambitious, we may have a chance of retaining a sufficient measure of optimism to defy the sadness that the years deposit on the soles of passing time. This truism applies to my visits to the sea as well, turned golden by a particular kind of melancholy and gratitude. Those who experience the sea as a kind of reward, a gift rather than a mere fact, will know what I am talking about. Some of us only become aware of the great blueness when we sink to the bottom of it, and there's no shame in that.

“That's how I'll be while I'm alive, he'd say always and everywhere, until summer love took him down. The season's here, she's here, her name is Libi, she comes from London.” The Split rappers TBF—The Beat Fleet—shout at me through my earphones. They're great jokers, having found the perfect mixture of existential bitterness and the honey of human illusion. I've been here at this writer's residency for only a couple of days but I've already fallen in love with Split and its smoothly polished *kalas*—the characteristic narrow streets of our Mediterranean cities—which I celebrate with the loyal company of my footsteps.

The great Croatian poet, Tin Ujević, needed four decades to penetrate the agonized and deep poetry of this city, a place he otherwise found heavy and exhausting. It looks like my forty years are up as well. I'm back at the scene of the crime, which is how Nikola Čelan, founder of TBF, described his return, rejoining the band to help his sick friend, Saša Antić, who wrote the group's legendary texts that transcend the typical rap sequence of rhyme and repetition, the same old sighs and cries.

I am drinking my ritual coffee in one of the rare bars reserved for Split's urban natives, reading an interview with Nikola in the

Sunday edition of the legendary newspaper *Slobodna Dalmacija* (Free Dalmatia), talking about how he had moved on from rap to the Dalmatian band Libar, but immediately responded to the summons of his old friend and returned to play his first concert in years as if he were going to play a game of footy with some old street friends. Emotions are permitted in Split, unaccompanied by the embarrassment that attends them in other cities. But you never know: the border between love and ill will that quickly becomes aggression is almost invisible here. Nikola also speaks of this, recalling the fist fights from the early nineties when the mere appearance of otherness was provocation enough for those from Split's quarters.

A couple of pages on, I find an interview with someone else who would like to return but cannot. That's at least what Stanko Poklepović a.k.a. Špaco, one of the legends of Split's football team, Hajduk, claims. He would like to talk only about football. He knows everything about the topic—really everything. Sounds familiar. Indeed, this type is common here and in Slovenia also. We, of course, don't let them get a word in edgewise. We even mock some of them—in fact, that's what we do best. And they know it, remaining quiet or sharing their wealth of experience only with a select circle, hidden in some deep shadow of a stadium that no one wants any longer.

Poklepović hides nothing, unlike some of the masters of our tourist mecca who are overly attuned to their reputation. He simply says what he knows. With none of the obligatory fear of embarrassing himself in the eyes of the two-faced mediocrities and other whackjobs in the public sphere. To start with, Poklepović analyzes Messi. According to Špaco, it is incredibly difficult to mark him, as he constantly runs with the ball and makes a remarkable number of steps. Split's coaching legend states that defenders simply cannot anticipate what path Messi will take. He thinks Messi should be covered from the front rather than the back. He concludes his brief account with the following statement: "When I talk like this, everyone calls me a philosopher!"

And no doubt, philosophy is in the air. Until, that is, the southern wind—the *jugo*—blows. Nobody wants that. Even the know-it-alls cower before it, going silent or just repeating that all-knowing “e” sound that confirms everything while saying nothing.

As it happens, I have my *Split za začetnike* (Split for Beginners) with me, a peculiar guidebook, the city’s alphabet, as the authors who are otherwise journalists at *Free Dalmatia* call it. Thumbing through this highly useful book, a collection of the city’s myths and other Split happenings, I encounter the word *jugo*. One of the authors tell us that it is entirely unnecessary to cultivate a particular emotion towards a certain kind of wind, and yet that there is no sane person on this earth who does not hate the *jugo*. According to him, only the mentally unhinged love the southern wind.

Needless to say, the reader should take of all this with the distance that is necessary to survive in this place. Among other things, the advice that concludes the passage on this evil wind goes something like this: “If you are in Split when the *jugo* is blowing and are approached by a smiling person, retreat immediately. Whatever you do, do not begin a conversation with this person. In fact, it is best if you avoid serious and indifferent people as well.”

And really, I begin to wonder as I feel a smile creep across my face. What if... No, it can’t be. I’m not there yet, though you never know. Around here, they catch you in their *dir* and then you’re done for. It won’t let you go. *Dir* is another word from the wealth of slang this city boasts, which respects its permanencies, its saints, and its Hajduk, of course, that reigns above all else. To catch someone in your *dir* is to make fun of someone and not let them off the hook. Often for no reason at all. Though then again, sometimes you might have a pretty good reason.

For a moment, I think this would be good therapy for those who are too smart and smug, those to whom nothing ever happens, protected as they are by their own significance. Our white-washed

Ljubljana has too many of these types, and a bit of senseless *dir* would surely do them no harm. Just as it would do no harm to those we tolerate day in and day out, although we actually don't need to.

But it's probably an illusion, one I have been allowed to cultivate for some time, for as long as I have been in this city, for as long as the defiance—known as *dispet*—that is also a part of this city's urban culture remains with us, just as its books and newspapers remain with us, the ritual coffee in the company of *Free Dalmatia*, when you have forgotten that it is Sunday and the cafés close a bit earlier than usual. Until the moment you are roused by the voice of the waitress, hissing with her traditional venom: “*Halo, kusur momak!*”—“Hey man, pay up!”

And you no longer know where the voice is coming from: whether from the neighboring bar or from a song, like the one by TBF, in which the boy named Mara—the boy with no money, no *para*—falls in love with the waitress and decides to put on a floral shirt. It's all par for the course as if nothing could go wrong. And, of course, nothing is wrong when everything is wrong.

And then finally the lines from the song “*Fantastična*” (Fantastic), which, in its ambiguity, deals with everything: “And he doesn't know whether to laugh or to cry. There is nothing but air around Mara. The dreams smile and shake hands with the void. And then he says: come on, let's go to the movies. And he's off on some wild dream. It was then that I saw her for a fleeting moment.”

The Great Talents

Another European cup is slowly approaching and our chosen team will be competing again. And because it is chosen, so too are we, regardless of our political and other disagreements. Rich and poor, privileged and elite, winners and losers, the forgotten, the judged, the unjustly persecuted, in short, all of us once again have the right to cheer under one jersey, one insignia, one flag, player, or team, and to stand calmly and proudly at attention before an anthem that no one really understands let alone accepts.

Those who have been losing day in and day out will finally triumph, side by side with those who have been hollowed out by their endless victories, those who would, secretly, deep inside, like to feel the bitterness of real defeat. A society that has long ago abandoned its faith in both unity and the expressive power of the individual will briefly glow with team spirit. Even those who never help, who think only of their own good, will suddenly begin to pass the ball, to share with others, as if they ever really considered the common good.

The time has come for never-ending and seemingly significant debates about a sport we love more than all of life's tribulations. At least that's what those of us, who keep forgetting that the phrase "great talent" is a synonym for someone who has already dropped out of the game, someone who is no longer competitive, manage to convince ourselves. And that is exactly what people today are most afraid of: to be cut out of their share. A great talent is one who plays beautifully but ineffectively, and, as such, brings in no money and is no longer wanted. What's more, when we identify someone as a great talent, we place a heavy burden of anxiety and expectation upon them, a burden that they must carry on and off the court. Who then would even want to be a great talent these days?

All these thoughts occurred to me as I was drinking coffee with a friend who is a great talent himself, and so knows exactly what it means to play with the expectations of others. Just like me, he could have said that he cleverly cashed out on his talent, but we both know that isn't true. It all depends on the expectations of course, which are often too great. Luckily, we can still manage to joke at our own expense which is yet another special talent, this one difficult to squander. A precondition is that you understand your limits and play to your strengths. My friend and I soon found out that we can still manage to pull that off too. It is a real miracle that we remain passionate about the frenzy of fandom, which takes us back, whether we want it or not, to some other time, a time full of misleading illusions and the deceptive fulfillment of dreams that never came true—a time when others played and won instead of us. And, of course, they also sweat for us, like that Janez who we used to call “the Swiss” who had too much faith in the promise our nation's elite fed us about becoming the second Switzerland if only we were as hardworking as we could be. And so he worked his entire life for others until it was too late: he became a great talent, and did so in a land that will never be Switzerland. And the worst thing is he still had to play and sweat. And we were so close, so very close, he sometimes consoles himself, just like we were so close to a medal during one or another of all those European and World Basketball Cups: how we missed out by just one good pass, one flash of brilliance, one more play. How many times have we recalled Dražen and imagined how he might execute this or that play, or Kićanović or Dalipagić before him? And if only Sani didn't get injured, and Beno, and finally Erazem. So much talent and all for nothing.

And so the mind inevitably wanders to eighteen-year-old Luka Dončić and his boyish face, beneath which hides a new leader who will settle all the old scores. At least, that's what those who can't live without an inflated sense of optimism would like to think.

Another legend of the Olimpija Team from the time when Ljubljana was still a metropolis of basketball happens to be sitting

at a nearby table and is just in earshot of our conversation. He interrupts us, saying that there is nothing to fear with “the little one” as he refers to Dončić: he will become a true leader. Dragić is departing and Dončić’s time has come. This despite the family quarrel, which, according to this guy, no longer matters.

“The kid wasn’t at fault for the two missed free throws against Croatia. He missed them because of Gogi. Gogi should have been throwing but he preferred to make his fifth personal foul. Just like the third and fourth ones in rapid succession. Just so he wouldn’t have to decide the game. That’s why he didn’t shoot.” So sang our classic Dinarid, famous for his remarkable shot and for his basketball intelligence. I remained skeptical—the whole thing seemed like forced and counterfeit mythology. My friend also wasn’t too excited about the theory. Seeing our reticence, the basketball veteran only continued:

“Of course, no one noticed the deliberate fouls. Dragić is too committed. But we watch the games from the bench, not from the stands like the rest of you. The fans don’t see these things. They get too carried away.” He was confident, which is to be expected from someone who didn’t remain just a great talent. I knew the feeling well, getting carried away, and watching with my heart instead of my head. Who hasn’t done this? Whoever has even a bit of heart loses it from time to time. The ones who have no heart remain sober and focused, and ultimately turn a profit from it. As for me, I was generally among those who got carried away. I had talent, sure, a talent for getting carried away. My friend interrupts my contemplation and wonders what happened to all the talents who did not become Donči, the ones who ran out of the killer instinct that separates talented individuals from serious basketball players. For a moment, I think he wants to give back more of the old fame to which he has been slowly saying farewell.

“You know, I wanted to die when I lost to weaker opponents,” he says emphatically before continuing his tale about great talents. He tells me about the coach who says a thirteen-year-old should never be called talented. The word should be abolished. Because

in addition to having talent, you have to work, sweat, have no fear. “One moment of fear is enough to end your career,” he concludes. That’s what happened to him, only once, but at the worst possible moment.

Talent always acts as an alibi for those who would prefer to pass life by. I remember all the fairy tales about Dražen Petrović, whispered on the local courts, the unmistakable feeling that the miracle child from Šibenik was the embodiment of pure talent. We wouldn’t dare think things could be otherwise. And he worked unimaginably hard to keep feeding our illusion with his victories. Maybe that’s why Gogi deliberately committed that fifth personal foul, if in fact he did. Let Luka take the decisive free throws. He’ll have to take them sooner or later anyway, just like back in 1983 in Šibenik, two seconds before the final whistle of the game that determined the Yugoslav champions, a dewy-eyed Dražen took the free throw, standing firm, refusing to be carried away by the expectations of the audience and all his friends and family. Because he was as hard as stone, even when he had a big heart.

Believe in Your Basket, Luka

So much was buzzing around my head as I watched the NBA draft during which our own Luka Dončić was chosen third. I couldn't help but recall the late Dražen Petrović who entered the most competitive basketball league on earth in 1986 as the best player from the old continent. Back then, Dražen was ours just as much as Luka is today, and we were equally convinced that he would one day become the very best on the other side of the puddle, as we like to call the Atlantic Ocean. In those days, we still believed in our basket. We were full of pride and completely fearless. The giant from Šibenik went there convinced that he would show the Americans how basketball was played. He had no interest in the contract that had reduced his playing time in advance. He wanted to play and win the way he was used to, but they wouldn't let him. At least not right away. Portland had big ambitions and owned two players who at least on paper were better than Dražen. Draxler and Porter had to play, even when it was clear that Yugoslavia's captain was better than at least one of them.

He, and we along with him, felt like we were robbed of our dreams. Dražen sat, stared, and waited until he finally found a club with less star-studded names, and once again become what he was before he left for America: an insatiable scoring machine, a man in love with the touch of the ball. He was unstoppable when he began to play his game. The game back then was not yet entirely focused on offense, being structured around serious defense, and yet Dražen effortlessly pounded the ball through the hoops of the most professional teams. He embodied the warning that Europe was getting closer to them than some of the arrogant American superstars were willing to admit. In the beginning, he was mocked for his exaggerated and emotional celebrations, but, in the end,

everyone recognized him as a giant of the game. Dražen was a pioneer in the true sense of the word.

Everyone who followed him had it easier. Divac, Kukoč, Sabonis, Nowitzki, and the others just continued what their captain had begun. And now we find ourselves at the beginning once again. We believe, while they are cautious, always betting on their own boys. Indeed, two NBA clubs refused to recognize what everyone, with a few rare exceptions, could clearly see on this side of the puddle. Namely, that Dončić, at his youthful nineteen, possesses a basketball intelligence and maturity the game has never witnessed before. And Sir Charles, as if he has forgotten what Dražen unleashed so long ago, is once again expressing doubts about the genius of this untested European messiah. Meanwhile Luka merely smiles like someone who has come to settle some scores from the past. And no doubt he will.

Those of us who played on Ljubljana's courts in the early nineties agree with Donči's sentiment. Sometimes we even played against a boy who appeared one day from Belgrade to play for the Ilirija Basketball Club, a small club in Upper Šiška. Saša Dončić was as big a talent as his son but the stars did not align for him and so his search dragged on. I still remember him standing on the edge of the three-point area with the hesitation of someone playing around with younger kids, watching what's happening on the court. He was a master of prediction, always one step ahead of everyone else. Put simply, he read the court like a chess board. Despite his weaker shot, which earned him the occasional jab, he was the undisputed ruler of territory. In defense as well, he always positioned himself in a way that made it impossible to get around him. He possessed what is called basketball IQ, a phrase we could discuss for hours and hours without arriving at its precise definition.

What is certain is that intelligence concerns more than just the court. Whoever does not master their intelligence off the court cannot become a top basketball player. The errors of a player's private life inevitably migrate to the game and vice versa. Luka is a true miracle in terms of the maturity with which he approaches

the sport. The predatory rationality with which he responds to the game's developments. How he waits for the right moment, which always will arrive sooner or later. In contrast to Dražen, who had one of the fastest shots in the history of the American professional league, the younger Dončić is excellent in other elements of the game as well. Even when his shot is off, he remains useful for his team, nourishing it with his confidence. That's how experienced veteran players usually play, not someone who is only beginning to gain experience. Sometimes it looks as if even his teammates feel embarrassed for their hopelessly dominated opponents. And to top it off, his smile disarms even his most stubborn of opponents. How many times have we seen attempts to rattle him, underhanded fouls and deliberate strikes, in the hope that he'll succumb to pressure and finally encounter reality? At his age, they reason, he cannot be so perfect, so complete.

Even we recreational players who from time to time have measured ourselves against the real thing know that a good basketball player can never allow himself to be provoked. In fact, it is the one thing that must not happen. Although there are exceptions, they are rare. Some players need to be provoked in order to find their real drive. Jordan, for example, was like that. But just like with Luka, some laws simply did not apply to Jordan. For those of us who played street basketball in the days before it was professionalized, nervousness was obligatory. If the court didn't make you nervous, the whole exercise was meaningless. Of course, by the end of the game, we had forgotten all about our nerves.

One of the reasons for the disappearance of any real social life on basketball courts is the fact that games no longer possess such high stakes. Primož Puntar, who was always a pleasure to play with because he played for the team and not for himself, remembers how he once played one-on-one at the Bratovševa apartment complex in Ljubljana against a notorious hooligan whom everyone feared. As if on cue, Primož accidentally fractured the guy's orbital rim with his elbow. He expected a hot-headed reaction, an explosion of anger if nothing more, but the usually belligerent

player remained calm. He knew it wasn't intentional and didn't say anything. He showed that he could be the bigger man when it mattered most.

There are so many stories like this from Kolezija to Ježica that today we can hardly remember them all. It is as if they all blended together into a single emotion, what Kocbek, perhaps the greatest Slovenian poet, called "the playfulness of spirit." In his book *Tovarišija* (Comradeship), Kocbek describes the feelings that used to overcome him when, as a young partisan, he made his way into the liberated territories. "We sat around for a time, saving ourselves by telling jokes..." It is almost as if he were describing the discomfort of those who frequented Ljubljana's best basketball courts, a discomfort that came from being trapped in the ritual of the asphalt, which kept bringing us together as if we were the city's lost children.

We were never complete strangers to one another because we were united by a particular social code, a form of tribal language distinct from what was spoken in the wider environment. The wisecracks flew into or past the basket, no one caring about the consequences. We were all part of the same moments that were repeated again and again. Of course, winning was the most important thing. But only because of the game. If you lost, you had to wait for the next game, something no one wanted to do. Sometimes the wait lasted hours and hours depending on how many teams (three-a-side) had signed up. So you had to win if you didn't want to wait. For the game itself, for the playfulness of spirit.

Serious players regularly played on the Bratovševa courts, among them Mario Kraljevič who was once a forward on the Olimpija team. This was also true of the courts near the Kolezija swimming pool where more than a few former members of the Yugoslav national team were scorched, leaving the court with bent heads. Basket (as we called it, using the English shorthand) had certain specificities, among them lots of dirty holding fouls. Some players could not be beat because they always got themselves fouled, which meant they always had the ball. You had to decide:

score or foul. If you didn't foul, they scored again and again. It often happened that players like this could not lose on their home turf. You could be at the top of the first league and still lose on some local court where the poets of the asphalt reigned supreme.

Encounters between local legends were a sight to behold. On one occasion, the then twenty-year-old model Melanija Knavs showed up at the court to watch her boyfriend, a passionate basketball player. Witnesses report that the boyfriend was completely serene as if nothing special were happening, but that the hands of all the other players began to tremble. Melanija, as we know, was already ready for the big league. As for us, all we had were our courts and the friendships we made on them. Some went very deep. On one occasion, two friends who had been playing together since they were eighteen-year-olds and hanging out for all of those ten years, were drinking their obligatory post-game beer. This time, instead of the endless debates about whether Dražen, if he were still alive, would have signed for New York and become champion of the NBA along with Starks and Ewing, or the soliloquies about Dušan Hauptman's peerless jump shot, they fell into conversation about their fathers. One of them described his old man in precise detail and his friend yelled: "But that's my dad!" The second responded: "No, that's my dad!" He couldn't imagine, not even in his wildest dreams, that he had spent a decade—never the wiser—playing basketball and carrying on a friendship with his own brother. After trading descriptions and comparing other facts, it turned out that indeed the two of them were half-brothers. Their father had lived a double life and never imagined the brothers would meet. But the comradeship of basketball made it happen. What happened next, nobody knows, and it doesn't matter to the story either.

Dario Vodanović arrived in Ljubljana on August 24, 1992, straight from Derвента in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He immediately became a member of the squad of the Olimpija Basketball Club where Peter Vilfan, the venerable institution of both Slovenian and Ljubljana basketball, still rules. Dario was an

extraordinary passer, something that Pero, who also simply couldn't miss in those days, saw with his own eyes. The same fame was enjoyed by Hauptman, Kotnik, Poland, and a few other members of that generation. Once, when Dario made a well-timed pocket pass, Vilfan patted him on the back and told him he might actually be something one day. When they went forward the next time, Dario managed to make it to the three-point line, and Vilfan passed to him. And that's how Dario became one of the few players who ever received a pass from Peter Vilfan. Only once and perhaps never again, but it was a special honor.

A special place among the Ljubljana courts was held by the Ilirija in Upper Šiška where Goran Dragić, a member of the Ilirija Basketball Club who later transferred to Slovan, used to play. Gogi played and enjoyed himself, his younger brother Zoran circled the court collecting signatures, their father Milinko dropped by on roller skates. But the whole party ended with the sound of their mother's voice calling out: "Lunch!" The boys who played with Gogi say he hasn't changed much since then. He is still as kind as when he was being handled by the legendary Spasoje Todorović, the former center of Olimpija and the perennial good spirit of Ljubljana's basketball scene. A player that Vilfan never passed to. Needless to say, Spale could never forgive him. Maybe they'll talk about it one day.

A similar conversation took place between one of the most legendary players from Šiška and his neighbor. It was a time when permissive parenting was still in the future and hierarchy remained more or less intact. In other words, some seventeen-year-old kid couldn't just talk back when playing against forty-year-olds. It's like today when a seventeen-year-old walks onto the court in the company of his parents. First of all, the older players have to let the newcomer onto the court, and we all know what is allowed and what isn't. No exceptions. The unwritten rules applied equally to all. If a ten-year-old ran onto the court during a game, almost tripping over one of the players, he was kindly asked to leave. If it happened a second time, Mladen picked up the kid's ball and

kicked it clear into the nearby stadium behind the speedway. On one occasion, one of the boys yelled that he was going to go get his dad. All forty players in the hole behind the Ilirija stadium answered in unison: sure, you go do that. And the kid really did come back with his dad who was a head shorter than Mladen. It turned out this was a guy in the neighborhood who would rather argue with basketball players than discipline his son. Mladen couldn't believe he had actually shown up. When the man began to berate Mladen, Mladen calmly slapped him across the face. The father, of course, called the police, but they only made it to the edge of the basketball court—they didn't dare go farther. When they heard from a safe distance that the kid didn't listen to the warnings and kept running between the legs of the players, the cops muttered a few words and took off. Dario and Gianpaolo—who is currently writing a book about *šut* (the Slovenian slang word borrowed from English for shooting the ball, and a skill he still possesses today), which I heard will be dedicated to Slavko Kotnik—also met on the Ljubljana courts. Today they are business partners. Dario says he would have never had the opportunity to run his own bar were it not for Ljubljana basketball. “It was only on the courts that you got to know someone well enough to trust them with a bar. That happened to me when I was just twenty-three.” These are the words of a Bosnian who was immediately accepted in Slovenia. Not once did he hear a single remark about his nationality, except of course from his Bosnian brethren, the sons of mixed marriages who were actually born here.

He learned the Slovenian language on and beside the basketball courts, mostly when his teammates corrected him. I cannot help but be surprised by the mastery of our language exhibited by someone who came to Slovenia so late in life. I'm sure he was helped by the long-standing tradition of basketball games held at the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana, which organized recreational sports for students back then, games that were attended regularly by over forty students who were not actually students. We all carried a student ID with the same last name and participated

in the games again and again without ever raising suspicions. But when one of us forgot to pay the symbolic membership fee, the whole scheme came apart, and once again, we were on the hunt for a new sports hall that might house our unquenchable basketball exploits.

And we are still searching for it even though there is a dwindling supply of Kocbek's "playfulness of spirit." Our street basketball raised the interest of the market and now the people who play well do it primarily for money at street tournaments around the world. It's no longer simply for the game. Or because we don't want to wait around to play. The nerves are also no longer real, authentic, the kind that make you blush a couple of years later. Well, at least not now. So believe in your basket, Luka, so you won't end up just a commodity, just a clause in some contract that is being passed around from franchise to franchise.