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THE BRIDE:

*Make haste, my beloved,
and be thou like a roe
or a young hart
on the mountains of spices!*

– The Song of Songs

For Eva and Mitja

I

This indeed was not the first time Valent Kosmina had been troubled by the thought that someone had pushed or seduced him – or that he had himself, perhaps out of clumsiness or carelessness, simply strayed – into something that would later be difficult to get out of. This idea, this fear, was in fact quite familiar to him, and naturally it unnerved him, but never to the degree that he could not shrug it off. A sensible person, after all, manages in one way or another to persuade himself that he is all right, that he is sufficiently in control of himself, and that life will therefore run its course, peacefully and properly, to its bitter end.

Nor was this the first time he had been tormented by insomnia, and there had been periods, even back when he still had one job or another, when he did not really know what to do with himself. Strange and useless thoughts would sometimes cross his mind. Even stranger were his dreams.

Meanwhile, despite the empty apartments and derelict buildings that were everywhere to be seen, the city was strangely boisterous, humming its low hum. Meanwhile, people, for the most part old people, were rushing off somewhere, overtaking each other, hustling and bustling; and streets, roads, and avenues were engulfed in stifling haze. And at times it seemed to him there was something wrong with all these elderly people who hurried along the street in their youthful disguises – that in reality, many of them no longer had anywhere to live . . . Continually, above the crowded rooftops and domes, the bell towers and apartment blocks, isolated puffs of white steam, each far apart from the others, twisted lazily into the sky. As he watched them through his living-room window on the fifteenth floor of his apartment tower, he imagined they came from slaughterhouses, though he had never tried to confirm it. And looming above the more distant ones, the ones just

below the eastern horizon, there would usually appear with the first morning light a billowing, mountain-like cloud.

At times the cloud would seem cold and gray, sometimes savage, sometimes pale and indistinct, but at other times, it was pleasantly warm and gentle, glowing softly at the edges. The shape of the cloud, too, was constantly changing. And from the changing variations in the cloud, Valent eventually (he did not really know when or why, it just seemed to happen) began to make predictions about what the day would bring, what he should avoid doing, and what he would have to do to make everything turn out well and good.

Later, after he had been forced to retire, after his two sons had moved away to their own respective futures in apartment blocks, and after his wife, who had retired the year before, had succumbed to tranquilizers and television – when, in short, he no longer had any work problems or family matters to worry about – this might have been the easiest time for him to get over these foolish ideas, which could really be quite tormenting, about the people on the street and the cloud. But even then he was not able to summon the courage. He began to feel a suspicious stabbing pain in his heart. But there was no way he could tell anyone about any of this, not even his wife. He would be too embarrassed. He would even feel somewhat humiliated, for that look of noble and forbearing self-confidence, which for some time now he had been obsessively cultivating and displaying (especially with his pipe between his teeth) – this guise of his would be exposed as nothing but common baseness and dissemblance.

Even now, in fact, he was quite proud of how convincingly he managed it, though naturally it required constant care and maintenance, so that sometimes, when the opportunity presented itself, it made sense for him to turn off the street and make his way to the door of this or that law firm or notary office and jot down its office hours in his appointment book . . . Of course, people had always been mistrustful of him, had always been wary, looking at him strangely, with a kind of dismissive yet menacing haze in their eyes, but recently he had noticed, generally speaking, that not only his wife but also the few others he knew from the building had begun to act somehow differently toward him, as if, inadvertently and unwittingly, he made them uneasy. It was partly because of

this, because of them, that the "mountain" was acquiring such terribly constant importance for him, and it was because of them, too, that he did not dare and did not wish to stop interpreting its warnings and meanings.

Somewhere far away, deep in his memory, there still occasionally flickered the image of a valley that once must have been his home. But he could not remember if back then, or rather, back there, he had been able to see any mountain. Maybe. But everything from his childhood was such a blur it could not possibly have any definite meaning, and indeed, these fragments, the hazy outlines of this valley, instead of being part of some actual but distant past, might just as easily be the remnants of a dream . . . Then, too, there would be thoughts about animals descending in groups from the beauty and silence of the mountain, down and down, every day hurrying again into the valley; mostly they were goats, great black herds of goats, so that nearly the entire mountainside appeared soft and undulating. And when in the morning a flock of pigeons might fly across the rooftops and between the apartment towers and then veer sharply just beneath the "mountain," as if fleeing something, sometimes this did not bode well at all. Folds and furrows beneath the upper "crest" of the "mountain" were also serious warning signs. If there was a kind of hump on the "ridge," then he had to close the curtain halfway, light up his pipe at once, and all through the day, whenever he came to a door, stand for a moment in front of it and say to himself: "everything will be fine, it will be all right" – and so dispel the nagging fear that the very next moment something bad might happen, even a terrible accident. Even at home, if he wanted to go from the kitchen to the living room or the bathroom, each time he would have to stand for a moment thinking, until he had a clear feeling of confidence – confidence in the strength of his heart and in the redemptive thought – and all this would have to be concealed from his wife or, indeed, from whoever might be watching him. More than once, a shape had appeared in the cloud that looked like the face of some divinity. He detected contours of meekness, benevolence, or grace; and if below, among the "foothill" clouds, the red trace of dawn radiated out in narrow beams of light, then he knew which shoes he must put on, which shirt he must wear, and which, too, was the proper necktie (in any

case, it was the one he invariably wore on days when the cloud could not be seen) and, instead of goats, it was better to think about white, newly washed sheep, the ewes with two little lambs apiece, grazing peacefully under a steep cliff.

This morning, too, that is to say, on the morning when the newspapers delivered the news about the murder in Brežine, he was, pipe between his teeth, observing the “mountain” against a sky that was still a somewhat nocturnal blue. At the same time, the remnant of a familiar half-dream was again, with its usual torment, weaving among his thoughts: most often he seemed to hear a voice, not his wife’s, but a sort of childish sing-song voice calling to him, or maybe just singing, which in the morning when he woke up, always left him with an anxious sense of emptiness. And when the “mountain” had settled and the first gleaming rays of dawn fanned out red through layers of elongated cloud, he was once again filled with fearful misgivings about the awakening day and the people on the street and the puffs of steam and the city, which was slowly, lazily, opening its hungry maw to devour the herds, and the dreams and the thoughts, and the startled flock of pigeons above a nearby dome and bell tower. And again he was seized in some deep hidden place by that feeling of needless haste, as if someone – who knows when or where – had commissioned him, commanded him to do something, something important, urgent, and he must set about these tasks without delay, he must get going, must be somewhere – although the “where” and the “why” were somehow always missing; it was as if he heard, echoing in his head, “Go! Hurry!” and this command in itself, without reason or purpose, was enough to send him into the crowd, onto the streetcar, and then anywhere at all, into the rush, maybe with a black briefcase in his hand and certainly with a meaningful, serious expression on his face, going from door to door, wherever there was a sign for a lawyer or notary, stepping into the vestibule and then, a minute or so later, back out to the street and onward, as if he were always a little late and worried about

it, but always, of course, maintaining a guise of importance and dignity. So he shook out his pipe. He dressed in his impeccable gray suit, tied his necktie, put on his well-polished shoes, and hurried to the elevator, glancing a few times at his watch, just like any businessman who knows that time is money; and then, down to the vestibule of his building, where he nodded in passing, absently and stiffly, to someone leaving for work or wherever else, took his newspaper from the mailbox and, as if in a hurry, returned to his apartment.

Only later, sitting in his living room in the armchair by the window, his pipe freshly lit, after first taking a look, as was his custom, at the naked girl with the honey-sweet smile in the middle of the newspaper and then immediately, without wasting time on trivialities, turning with an expert's resolve, in a single motion, to the stock market reports – only then did he calm down a little and become more absorbed in his reading, letting his thoughts swarm among the submeanings and supermeanings, opportunities only an expert could spot, and well-concealed traps, which he of course would never fall into were he ever presented with the possibility. He quite enjoyed this swarm of thoughts, these emerging scenes of his own importance that somehow drew him in, drew him on to acts of heroism, which are of course essential when the data revealed to the public is so very different from the truth, and when one's ship is sailing safely along a well-conceived, carefully charted route, and when little white sheep are floating in a clear sky above puffs of steam, looking as if they had just been washed. Now he turned the page and, just to amuse himself, read about some shady business involving the purchase of brewery tanks – until a headline in the lower left-hand corner caught his eye: *MURDER IN BREŽINE*. The article said that the body of Metod Mario Pavlin, a wealthy and respected widower, had been discovered accidentally by neighbors in the Villa Carlina, that death was caused by an unusually precise “surgical incision” on the neck, and that the initial results of the investigation pointed to murder. In the interests of the investigation, police were not yet divulging any details; nevertheless, they did reveal that, since a number of extremely valuable items, including cash, were left undisturbed, this was not in all likelihood a case of murder for gain. The reporter went on to say that investigators would undoubtedly soon provide a

more detailed account, inasmuch as the entire Brežine neighborhood was so profoundly distressed and dismayed by what had transpired.

Valent naturally had doubts about this last point. After all, in a big city like this, reports of murder are, if not everyday occurrences, at least fairly frequent. A person who lives in the same neighborhood where a murder takes place might, indeed, upon hearing such a report, feel a certain distress, might even wonder a little about this or that detail or particularity – but all this, to be sure, is quite removed from any truly profound distress and dismay. While “distress and dismay” might very well characterize the reaction of the victim’s friends and relatives, and maybe, too, a very narrow circle of neighbors and acquaintances, for most people, even those living just two or three streets away, the whole affair would be little more than a curiosity, a topic for amusing gossip and café conjecture, which would naturally start losing its titillating freshness the very same day it was reported. And once you crossed the first major intersection on either side of the crime scene, then it would become something entirely impersonal – a serious issue, to be sure, but part of what might be called a bigger problem, about which one could only shrug one’s shoulders. And as you followed the streets into the city, the whole thing would gradually become something quite mundane, just gray ordinary reality, of no particular interest to anyone.

For Valent Kosmina, too, this news would no doubt have remained a matter of complete and ordinary indifference had it not involved Brežine, a pleasant, stately district of chestnut-lined avenues, old villas surrounded by noble gardens, and softly lit sleepy streets along which he had made it his custom these past few years to stroll, despite the neighborhood being so far away. For it was only in Brežine that he managed to feel, at least to some extent, truly a gentleman, and these evening strolls in his dapper black evening suit were the only thing that made his days complete. He delighted in a certain epicurean tranquility as he walked in elegant attire with calm, deliberate step beneath the chestnut trees, and many of those he passed must surely have imagined that he himself resided in Brežine. His life would be almost miserable without this feeling of Brežine elegance. Indeed, he loathed the thought of walking through some shabby park like some ordinary pensioner.

Of course, he always made sure his wife knew nothing of these strolls. He made up a story about a group of retired professors and doctors who liked to meet in a certain café – top-notch people, in other words, who expected him to join them more or less every evening. Maybe she even believed it. But in any case, there had recently been no problem at all with him going out in the evening whenever he wanted. She just accepted it. It was fine with her . . .

Last night, too, he had gone for a stroll in Brežine, and this now seemed a rather unfortunate, even somewhat ominous circumstance. He could not ignore the fact that, just as on all his other strolls, last night too he had been observed by people who would remember him, who had always taken note of him, and who would undoubtedly be able to give a precise description to police investigators. As, indeed, could any of the staff at the Little Paradise, the tavern where he was, one might say, a regular.

In short, it appeared more than likely that the investigators would take every opportunity to make inquiries at the taverns in the area. Which meant that the waitresses and the two Paradise twins would report on him, too – report, that is, about his behavior last night, which was perhaps a little out of the ordinary, since he had stayed at the tavern for only a short time – he had not felt very well last night – and had barely touched his second carafe of burgundy when, without waiting for the waitress, he shook out his pipe, put a banknote on the table, and left. True, this was not the first time he had behaved in just this way or something like it. But probably they would not remember that now and therefore could easily draw the investigators' attention to him. This of course would be extremely unpleasant for him. Even precarious. For then, undoubtedly, his appearance as a man of means (and, for some, even a resident of Brežine) would soon be exposed as a sham; he would be put in quite a bind, terribly embarrassed and humiliated, at best, before his neighbors and his wife.

His first inclination was to abandon his Brežine strolls altogether, at least for the present, and in general, to keep far away from Brežine.

But it soon dawned on him that such a plan could prove to be a very bad, perhaps irreversible, mistake; that in other words, this in itself would certainly arouse serious suspicions.

He did, however, find consolation in the thought that they might very soon catch the actual perpetrator, if they had not done so already.

But somehow he could not convince himself of this.

And the more he thought it over, the more everything got tangled in a gloom of uncertainty – an anxiety he eventually managed to curb and contain within himself, but only with considerable effort that left him with a pain in his stomach.

The morning was already too far gone to consult the “mountain” for help.

He tried in vain to recall if he had ever chanced to see the name “Carlina” on any of the houses in Brežine. Unfortunately, he had never taken much notice of such details. At night this kind of thing is hard to see. And one is not particularly attentive. Moreover, the dusky fronts of the houses are mostly set off a little from the street, behind tall iron fences, and veiled by the shrubbery and trees of the front lawns.

The newspaper did not name the street or give any more precise time as to when the event occurred. As far as he knew, he could possibly have walked past that very villa every time he took his stroll. If so, then he might have been fairly often seen in its vicinity. Which, of course, is an item of information. Which investigators, of course, would seize upon. Cling to. And the investigating officer, stubborn, taciturn and unflappable, would ask precisely that, about that very thing; he would hardly buy the story about him merely taking a stroll.

As Valent heard his wife moving about – getting out of bed, leaving the bedroom, going into the bathroom – just like any other morning – the pain in his stomach got worse; it became a kind of chill cramp.

Hastily, he raised the newspaper again. And through the aromatic smoke of his pipe, tried to read something. Anything at all. Tried to absorb himself in reading. To adopt the posture and assume the guise of a man of leisure engaged in his daily routine.

She did not greet him when, in her pink dressing gown, makeup and creams, with a towel twisted like a turban on her head, she entered the living room. She would often come out of the bathroom in just this way, more or less early in the morning, with an almost involuntary scowl on her face. And with a forced cough. Usually he paid no attention to her. But

today he wanted to feel that the two of them were closer, friendlier; he would be grateful to her for any sign of intimacy, any show of loyalty, and so despite her silence he said good morning and as a mark of politeness shook out his pipe and put down the newspaper.

She did not respond.

Without a word she went into the kitchen and, from the sound of it, set about making coffee.

At the very least she might have returned his greeting; it would have calmed him down. He wished he could just ask her to please say good morning to him. It would have been a positive sign – and of course it would have made him feel less uneasy; he would have settled down and tried to be sensible about things. But at the same time he had the thought that, even so, he could turn the whole thing to his advantage if, calmly and without a word, he simply went up to her and, right out of the blue, gave her a good smack in the face. He got chills just thinking about it. Nevertheless, he kept on staring at the newspaper, at its jumble of letters and lines of print and columns and pictures, all the while taking slow, deep breaths, silently, so she wouldn't hear, each time holding the air a few seconds in his lungs and then, no less furtively, letting it out. But the letters and lines of print continued to shimmer before his eyes like haze above overheated rooftops.

Without a word she brought him coffee. And with her own cup in hand went and sat down, coughing, in front of the television set.

Rather reluctantly, he mumbled out a thank-you. And without lifting his eyes, folded the newspaper. And turned immediately to the next page. And found himself gazing at the face and the nakedness of a little girl with black hair (that is, she was not much more than just a little girl) who smiled an artificial smile beneath an article about fashion design.

Although her hair and makeup were meant to be seductive, she was nevertheless still childlike, still just a little girl.

But as annoying as it was to look at this girlish body and this, as it were, willing invitation on the face of a child, it was no less annoying to have to listen to the television, which his wife had turned on. To hear that maudlin soap-opera music amid the roar and crash of ocean waves. Which were probably meant to indicate the unpredictability of life or even to

be a metaphor of that which, day after day and night after night, rocks and tosses the destinies of men and women. But now as he drank his coffee, he felt another particularly unpleasant stab near his heart. Recently, this had been happening rather frequently as he drank his morning coffee, even when he was not upset . . . As if to console himself, he tried imagining how he would appear, if need be, before the interrogators – what reserve, what cool magnificence he would display, how impeccably he would stand when they ordered him to stand, or if they said to sit, would sit; how he would tell them all, directly to their face, clearly and distinctly with absolute and dignified composure, that, yes, his life, like most people’s lives, was a lie . . .

From the television came the tearful voice of a woman in love calling out desperately to some León, who, however, did not respond.

Of course the interrogator would be sarcastic and rude and even use threats; he would roll his cold, steely eyes; and the faintly etched grimace on his meticulously clean-shaven, pampered face beneath his waxy bald scalp would express just enough contempt to say it all.

Which would show him to be, wholly and consistently, a true *inspector*, one who had mastered every nuance of procedure, who knew by heart the best way to get at the facts. And who of course despised even the slightest attempt at dissemblance . . .

The television music rose and fell and rose and fell, now and then suddenly brimming over, crashing in from the background, then yielding again before the tearful, reproachful sighs and moans of the lead actress, or rather, the lady in the soap opera, whose heart was breaking, obviously because of some trouble with her husband and lover, and who, to judge by the music, had just reached a fateful decision. Waves crashed against a cliff; from the air above or perhaps from the rocks below, came the cries of a seagull, and the lady was sobbing; dark and foreboding depths, as it were, issued forth from the music’s intermittent bass. Then, perhaps at the last possible moment, a warm, deep male voice prevented the worst from happening. The lady exhaled, “León!” and a tender, ethereal violin duet began, floating above the bass like gossamer and lingering on even after he replied, “Helena!” – then the waves

and the bass and the cries of the seagull gave way to the sounds of gentle, loving gratitude and deliverance. But the very next moment the city was roaring: the hustle and bustle of the street, footsteps, voices, impatient honking from what must be a traffic jam, and the distant wail of emergency sirens, maybe the police. The slaughterhouse smoke and the derelict buildings could not be heard. To judge from the soft clink of a coffee cup, his wife, in the ensuing interval with its portrayal of mundane reality, had helped herself to a sip of coffee. Recently she had often seemed like some alien creature to him. She had even stopped cooking. She was, she said, quite happy with the food from the pensioners' meal service; they fixed very hearty meals; and what is more, it really didn't pay to cook for just two people. She had waited long enough, she said, for her to be able to at last devote a little time to herself. And if he didn't like it then *he* could very well do the cooking. No, that's okay, he said, and had no other comment. And he was pleased once again with the way he had shown himself to be a master of forbearance, of superior indifference and the cool, unruffled countenance – a master, in short, of all the skills that characterize the gentleman, the leader, who in his elevated view of things pays little regard to mundane detail. Even, of course, if only outwardly . . . But that's the way it is, he would tell the interrogator, for the love of god, Inspector, that's just the way it is and there's nothing here for you to wonder at. Everyone strives higher, seeks greater importance, wants to rise to the summit, Inspector; we all want to reach the summit – what else? At this point, the detective would probably interrupt him. And maybe mention the scalpel . . . yes, he would definitely bring up the scalpel. But Valent would remind him of the saying, never yet proven wrong, that “clothes make the man,” and would remind him, too, that there are many different kinds of summits one might strive for and many different paths that lead to them.

The music from the television set was rising again and, somewhat raggedly, blended with the rumble of a car.

Then the doorbell rang.

Again, anxiety pounded at his heart and pierced through his thoughts. There was a buzzing in his ears. But he managed to compose himself. He did not lay aside the newspaper. He did not get up. To all appearances, he took no notice of

the doorbell, though it rang a second time, now sharper and more persistent. He clung to the thought, as to a life preserver, that even if they were now coming to take him away, there was nothing anyone could actually do to him.

At last his wife, with a reproachful sigh as if to say *he* could have moved his behind, shuffled sullenly to the door.

A shudder passed through the newspaper, and through his thoughts. He'd stand right up, he decided, if they asked for him in that dry official tone they had. And walk right over to them. And look them straight in the eye with a calmly superior, inquisitive gaze. And wait for them to tell him what they had to tell him. And perhaps he would say, "Please, gentlemen, do come in."

His wife opened the door.

Without saying anything.

He held his breath, listening; silence gaped from the hallway – and from between the lines and columns of print, and from the sweetly willing, childlike black-haired girl below them.

He detected a slight uncertainty in his wife's voice when, after a short time, she said, "Hello."

A man mumbled something.

"Yes, that's fine, I'll take it." She was already more at ease.

Then there was the clatter of a lid and now he could hear, quite clearly, the familiar voice of "Mr." Mario (as he was called), who was asking if her husband might be at home.

"He is, yes," she confirmed curtly.

Valent was troubled, even a little baffled, by the reticence of his wife's reply. Her manner with this "Mr." Mario had always been rather casual before, even sugary. But possibly her change in tone could be put down to the soap opera's influence, or perhaps it was only irritation at having to leave her TV program. He tried to dismiss it blithely as a trivial detail, but it was nonetheless peculiar that this "Mr." Mario – who, after all, had once been nothing but a street-corner pornography peddler and now was merely the deliveryman for the pensioners' meal service – should be asking about her husband. And should even say that he'd like a word with Mr. Kosmina, or rather (the man ventured to add, in a somewhat confidential tone), that he had something to ask him if he wouldn't mind.

“Mr. Mario would like to ask you something . . .” she mumbled, so off-handedly he could barely hear her, then hurried to the kitchen with the meal service’s combination trays and some sort of package.

But once in the kitchen she said in a louder voice directed toward the door: “Just go right in.”

“Oh, no, no,” said “Mr.” Mario, declining the invitation. “It’s just a small matter. Perhaps if Mr. Kosmina might be so good as to . . .”

Valent reluctantly put down the newspaper and stood up; then looking as if he had just been disturbed from some important work that demanded all his concentration, he went over to his harasser. Who, as soon as he saw him, stepped back meaningfully, deeper into the hallway, obviously expecting Valent to follow without hesitation.

“May I help you?” Valent demanded dryly and stood right where he was as if he saw no reason to cross the threshold.

But to his astonishment, the little worm – a skinny and strangely pallid man with shallow eyes, who had obviously spent a good part of his life tending to his now-gray little mustache and forelocks – gestured for him to come closer, as if it concerned some confidential matter that must at all costs be kept secret from Valent’s wife.

Valent was tempted to just turn around and leave him standing there.

His wife could be heard rattling dishes in the kitchen.

“Mr.” Mario, too, as if in a hurry, listened to the noise in the kitchen. Then from the pocket of his white workcoat he pulled out a bright pink envelope. He looked it over quickly, one more time, as if to make sure it was the right one, then held it out to Valent with a meaningful, confidential grin. “It’s for you,” he whispered. And came no closer. The rascal’s shameless innuendo could not be missed. He even winked and nodded, perhaps as a sign of some exclusive masculine bond between the two of them, as Valent stepped forward nevertheless and casually took the envelope. Then, feigning a mildly inquisitive nonchalance, he read his name in the lower right-hand corner. He thought he detected the fragrance of some fine, sweetly heavy perfume. But in front of this former pornography peddler and current pensioner-meal deliveryman, he had no wish to display anything other than an indifferent

acquaintance with such trivialities, concerning which, in any case, gentlemen of his ilk did not share confidences with anyone. So once more ignoring the man's meaningful grin, Valent simply said "thank you" and left "Mr." Mario to think whatever he wanted while he waited to collect his trays. It was not until he had returned to the living room, shut the door behind him and checked to see that his wife was not watching from the kitchen, that Valent quickly folded the envelope and stuck it in his pocket.

On television, meanwhile, there was some sort of quarrel. From the sound of it, someone was even slapped. And in the soft sobbing that followed, his wife was thanking "Mr." Mario for yesterday's spinach side dish.

What Valent most wanted to do, if anything, was to show the two of them, as they stood there in the doorway, just a fraction of the contempt he felt for them.

But instead, he simply picked up the newspaper as if he could care less. And turning the pages, perhaps more noisily than necessary, he tried not to think about the stabbing pain in his heart and the perfumed letter.

His wife did not say anything, did not ask anything, as she returned to the television; her main concern, it seemed, was whether she had missed anything important.