

COME TO BRATISLAVA!



Benjamin Reed

BY THE TIME Edgar Rusel reached the third-floor landing of Naama's East Village walk-up, his heart was pounding like it wanted to escape his chest. He could hear it in his ears. Edgar was not overweight, precisely, but neither was he aging very well. He lingered in the hall, waiting for his heart rate to slacken, to catch his breath enough to allow a full sentence before Naama opened her door. Naama, who was not quite young enough to be Edgar's daughter, was the only surviving employee at his store, Austerlitz Rare & Collectible Books. There had been others—a couple of girls from NYU who helped out on the weekends, a kid from the neighborhood who clocked in a few hours a week to wash the windows and alphabetize the shelves, and Helen, his former bookkeeper, who still included Edgar's address in group emails soliciting donations for leukemia research, disaster relief, and orthopedic surgery missions in Central America. Edgar deleted these emails without reading past the subject line. Over the last three years he'd

been forced to cut costs wherever he could. The store was now dark on Sundays and Mondays.

Edgar, his pulse still thumping like a trapped hare, walked down the hall searching for Naama's door, a bottle of red wine hanging from the bent fingers of his right hand. Edgar walked the unheated hallway until he found her door. 3-G. He paused before knocking. He reminded himself to be careful. On two occasions Naama, unthinkably, had campaigned to seduce him. Edgar couldn't fathom why. Not only was there the significant difference in their ages, Edgar often felt Naama was too exceptional to work in his dusty, crowded little store, let alone graft herself onto his personal life, such as it was.

The first time she made a move had been the year before, in Germany, after too many drinks on the last night of the Frankfurt Book Fair. The second occurred a few months ago, late one evening while they took a break from end-of-quarter inventory to eat Chinese food while sitting on empty, overturned paint buckets under the single bare light bulb of the storeroom. She just leaned over and kissed him, his closed mouth warm with macerated cashews and gingered prawn. Both times Edgar had smiled and politely ignored the warm center of her advances. At home, afterward, he castigated himself, wondering how he could refuse her, why he feigned emotional paralysis. There must have been some reason. Fear, probably. But fear of what? Finally he satisfied himself with a comprehensive recitation of his previous relationships. Several of them

had been lovely, but all had eventually imploded. What would happen if Naama, scorned, left him? How would he possibly replace her?

He knew he was flirting with disaster when he finally surrendered to Naama's standing inducement of a home-cooked meal. In his mind, ironically, the approaching evening became so much takeout Chinese. Sweet and Sour Dilemma. Naama was, all pretense aside, the closest thing he had to a best friend. "You're my rock," he'd say, hoping she'd know he wasn't joking, hoping also that she wouldn't force him to elaborate. He could only imagine that she wanted more than to be someone's heavy, reliable stone.

Edgar's pulse increased, again, when she opened her door and he was bathed in warm light and the spice and steam of a complicated meal simmering on her stove. Naama was barefoot but wearing makeup and a thin gold necklace that disappeared into her cleavage. Her black hair, as it had been since he first met her, was arranged in a neat bob, her short bangs cut with laser-beam precision. She wore a clinging burgundy dress that crossed her heavy chest and hugged her waist. Edgar reminded himself not to drink too much.

"Jesus," she said, touching his forehead. "Did you run here?"

They embraced briefly. He nodded at her pedicured toenails. "Should I take off my shoes?"

"Please."

He stepped out of his soft leather shoes and handed her the bottle. "Thank you," she said, reading the label. "But

nothing I'm making pairs very well with red."

Edgar shrugged. "Then save it." He'd paid sixty-eight dollars for the bottle of Bordeaux, which was more than he spent on lunch in an entire week, an impulse that belied Edgar's belief that he'd fully acclimated to his current state of penury.

"Or we can open it."

"No, that's okay," Edgar said as Naama took his coat and hung it by the door. "Save it for a special occasion. I could use some water, anyway."

Naama poured him a glass from a Brita pitcher and walked to where he'd collapsed onto her couch.

"Thanks," he said.

"Anything interesting happen at the shop today?" she asked.

"As a matter of fact," Edgar said, leaning to the side to pull his phone from his hip pocket, "I got a rather exciting email this morning."

"Oh?" Naama said, distracted, as she abandoned him for the kitchen nook.

"Unless you don't want to mix business with pleasure?"

Naama's dark hair fell forward as she dropped a pad of butter onto a frying pan. He could tell she smiled, even though he could only see a sliver of her face, illuminated in the light over the range. "Of course not," she said. "Mix away."

Edgar opened the email application and read aloud, in a cartoonish Eastern European accent:

Hello Mr. Rusel,

I am writing you because I have possession of the lost work of master Polish writer Bruno Schulz. These documents were hold by our family for many years, even though I just recently have discover their authority. These are written in hand, titled «The Messiah». If you are interested in purchasing, you will contact me at very soon ability. I read about your business reputation, and think that would interest you to buy. If you can please visit me in Košice, Slovak Republic, at your earliest convenience personally you will verify the authentic value of papers.

Sincerest,

Mira Sokol.

Naama turned around, wiping her hands on a white dishcloth. “Is this real?”

“Who knows?” Edgar said. “But I figure, I’m going to Frankfurt anyway. Why not leave a couple of days early and check this out?”

Naama turned back to the stove and stirred something in a saucepan, tasting it from the tip of a wooden spoon. She winced. “I don’t know very much about Bruno Schulz,” she said. “He was German?”

“No. Polish. Jewish-Polish. Died in the Holocaust.” Edgar gave Naama a thumbnail biography. Bruno Schulz had been a favorite of Edgar’s since he was an undergraduate. Particularly his collection of short stories, *The Street of Crocodiles*. Edgar had been snared by a single detail in the first story—Schulz’s description of walking through the

center of his town, past anonymous faces in the warm light of afternoon. From memory: “The passers-by, bathed in melted gold, had their eyes half closed against the glare, as if they were drenched in honey.” It was the last time he could remember finishing a book then immediately reading it again from the beginning. *The Messiah* was the title of the novel Schulz was supposed to have been working on when he was killed.

Naama turned off the gas. “Almost ready to eat. You sure you don’t want a cocktail? Gin?”

“I’m okay for now,” he said. Then, before she could change the subject, “I made a few calls. A critical volume of his work is about to come out. Even if I only broker a deal between this Sokol person and a publisher—acting as an agent, really—the fee could be considerable. Well worth our time to investigate.”

Naama nodded as she laid two china plates on the little wooden table between the kitchen and where Edgar sat watching her from the couch. “Which is why you don’t simply forward her email to a publisher.”

“Right.”

“Why not just buy it?” she asked. “Or would there be a conflict? With, you know, his estate? Does he have an estate?”

“Schulz’s published work was owned by his niece’s son. But it’s all public domain now. I’m not sure there’d be a conflict if this—if something new came to light. I don’t think so.”

Naama eyed him skeptically, back-lit by the light over the stove. “You should call a lawyer,” she said. “To make sure.”

“I know,” he said, nodding, looking at her hardwood floor. Actually, this was something he’d hoped Naama would understand implicitly, and resolve before he could be disheartened.

“Wait,” she said, straightening. “Flying out ‘a couple days early’ means you’d have to leave the day after tomorrow.”

“I know.”

“Well, let me know, and I’ll have your flight changed.”

“How much will that cost?”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure. Usually about a hundred dollars. I can change my ticket, too.”

Edgar considered this, eyeing the unopened bottle of Bordeaux. “No, just do mine. I’ll meet you in Frankfurt. If it’s a wild goose chase, better just one of us goes.”

“Okay,” she said. “If you don’t think you’ll need me.”

She seemed hurt. This surprised Edgar. “Naama,” he said. “When do I not need you? But I’ll have my phone. I’ll just be there a day or two.”

“Well, I hope it works out. Now: enough mixing. Let’s eat.”

After dinner Naama made dry martinis from a towering bottle of Bombay Sapphire, which she knew from experience was a kind of kryptonite for Edgar. At ten o’clock he was again slouched into her pristine white couch, swimming in gin, while she sat at the other end

in a demonstration of correct posture. Poised but not rigid. Was that what he was afraid of? Her unflagging self-awareness? As they talked, Edgar felt Naama watching him. She was plainly unbothered by the late hour. She shifted on the cushions and Edgar retreated by inches, but Naama advanced again. Then she was on him, and it was suddenly too late to invent a migraine.

"I'm happy you came over," she said. Her eyes were soft. She'd matched him drink for drink.

They kissed and fondled, Edgar's heart lulled by the gin and the caress of her lips across his earlobe. She bit gently into his neck and he laughed, not because it tickled but because he'd abruptly solved a small mystery.

Naama pulled back. "What is it? Why are you laughing?"

"It's nothing, I swear. I'm sorry."

"No." She tensed. "What?"

"It's just—I've been smelling this faint trace of *vanilla* all night. I thought maybe you'd made a dessert or something. Like a cake. I just realized, it's your perfume."

She laughed as she stood. "Come here," she said, pulling him toward her bedroom. Edgar followed her into the darkened room, where Naama's double bed abutted a large casement window, the white duvet cover blue in the moonlight. He stood before her as she sat on the edge of her bed, slowly unbuttoning his shirt. It had been so long since he'd been alone with a woman in her bedroom. This felt unreal, like *déjà vu*.

From the day he'd hired her, Naama's youth and

beauty had incited in Edgar a Calvinistic reaction to even appearing to play the part of the lecherous boss, though he had often stolen glances. Yes, he'd privately marveled at her figure. Naama's body existed on an ethereal plane between hale and voluptuous, an arrangement of shapes that Edgar had always found quietly inscrutable. Watching her undress was a kind of revelation.

"Naama, are you sure—?"

She told him to hush. "Of course I'm sure." She reached for his belt buckle. He felt himself unfasten.

RIDING THE F Train home in the morning, Edgar reminded himself that he didn't want Naama. She was too pretty, too young. She was like the store—a binding contract, promising disaster while posing as a profitable diversion. Despite her soft hands and disproportionately prodigious, almost matronly breasts, she was a spare, even severe woman. Her apartment was spartan, the walls bare. No sliding stack of LPs, no cat hair, no bong half-hidden in the corner. Just the obligatory wall of semi-precious books, some of which she'd bought from him with her discount, her bed taut with hospital corners. In the morning Edgar woke with his feet pinioned by Naama's sheets, and found her bathroom so gleamingly immaculate, that at first he was afraid to urinate.



EDGAR HAD A social life, once, but it hardened into necrosis shortly after he bought the store from Ari Austerlitz, eleven years ago, for one hundred and sixty-three thousand dollars. He withdrew most of his savings and took out a substantial loan in order to meet Ari's asking price. Ari, the bookstore's original owner and Edgar's only employer since his second year of graduate school, was eighty-one then, and giving heavy consideration to not renewing the lease. Since Edgar bought him out, Ari had moved to Florida and died from renal failure, but Edgar never changed the gilded letters arching across the store's large window. Keeping the name had been one of Ari's ironclad conditions.

The old man had not only stoked Edgar's love of old books, but also instilled in him an inflexible Old World work ethic. "In fact," Ari had once said, "there's plenty room to be pound-foolish, if you're forever penny-wise."

In something like eight years, three girlfriends had jettisoned Edgar after he failed, for the final time, to arrive at some forgotten occasion. What little time he had for happy hours, or long weekends, or even an hour at the gym, was subsumed by his late nights, six days a week, in his little Brooklyn storefront, or on speculative buying trips into Maryland, Pennsylvania, the north of England. He grew softer on breakfast buffets, paler under fluorescence. The bookstore demanded constant struggle, and over time Edgar grew monkishly content with his postliminary celibacy, a contentment that survived for years, inviolate, by virtue of his refusal to obsess about it.

Naama was Ari's great-niece. She'd just been discharged from the Israeli Army when she sat across Edgar's desk for her perfunctory interview. That was what—six years ago? Ari had called him, dying and decrepit, from a convalescent home near Tampa. "Just talk to her," Ari had said, as if winking through a thousand miles of telephone line. "I know you'll do the right thing."

Edgar didn't mind having Naama forced upon him. With Ari gone, he'd need someone who could read Hebrew, as rare Jewish texts remained a decent fraction of his business. Naama, who held a degree in Comparative Literature from Tel Aviv University, not only spoke fluent Hebrew but could read Yiddish with competency. She parsed Classical Hebrew without the aid of a dictionary. She practically came gift-wrapped.

Naama had been a computer systems specialist in the IDF, and deployed her military efficiency at rapidly placing most of Ari's stock online, where it could be browsed by high-end collectors around the world. This was meant to make Edgar's life easier, but the primary result was that he found himself on endless chains of buying trips, delving deeper and deeper into the country, just to maintain an inventory. When Edgar complained, Naama would cross her arms and reply, dryly, "In this economy, these are good problems to have."

She was right about the economy. Back then. But sales lessened, and as the downturn stretched toward permanence, it murdered their competition at such a

rate that Edgar was able to keep an inventory solely by purchasing his former competitors' unsold stock, until one day there was no one left for Edgar to sell his store to, if he ever truly desired escape. Edgar would get older, softer, paler. He'd spend the rest of his life wiping dusty covers with a damp cloth, restitching spines as inconspicuously as possible, using the same solution of ethyl alcohol to wipe away budding colonies of green mold from where it clung to the endless deckled edges of afternoons that sank unstoppably into evening.

EDGAR DISEMBARKED THE F Train at Ditmas Avenue. He pushed Naama from his thoughts by contemplating Bruno Schulz and Mira Sokol. If genuine, the value of the document in Sokol's possession was difficult to estimate. Potentially, Schulz's lost novel was second in importance only to Ernest Hemingway's lost early drafts, stolen when his first wife, Hadley, briefly abandoned her suitcase in a Paris train station in 1922.

Edgar walked to his apartment and powered on his laptop. Before he'd taken the train to Naama's, he'd emailed Mira Sokol, requesting she send him scans of sample pages. So far, there'd been no reply. Edgar started a pot of coffee and began packing his green canvas rucksack for Germany. The Frankfurt Book Fair, a massive and industrially incestuous dog and pony show, did little for his business. But his annual pilgrimage to Frankfurt—its German name the false but

hilariously apt cognate, *Die Frankfurter Buchmesse*—was a write-off, the closest thing he took to a vacation, and anyway Naama, who always accompanied him, considered the trip one of her benefits.

If the manuscript was authentic, how did this Mira Sokol come into its possession? Was she a survivor? A Google search confirmed that “Sokol” was in fact a Jewish surname. This might explain why she had emailed Edgar in particular, the proprietor of Austerlitz Rare & Collectible Books, before every other collector in New York.

Edgar knew vaguely that there was something of a row over Bruno Schulz—the essential question being his identity—whether he was a Jewish writer who lived in Poland, or a Polish writer who happened to be born a Jew. True, he was Jewish and had been murdered by a German officer in the Holocaust, but the urbane and middle class Schulz only ever wrote in German or Polish, and couldn’t speak more than a few words of Yiddish. If Mira was among those claiming Schulz for the Jews, she would have only sent inquiries to collectors in Israel or New York. And among the latter category, she would have found his store’s name first, alphabetically, on a very short list of private collectors trading in both mainstream literary books and historically significant Jewish texts.

Edgar had often wondered—but never asked—if his own surname was why Ari Austerlitz had interviewed him in the first place, when Edgar was a graduate student at Columbia looking for a part-time job at least tangentially

related to his MA in History and Literature. In fairness, Edgar had only intentionally prevaricated—or amplified, really—his fractional Jewishness on three occasions: 1) As an undergrad he applied for and won a scholarship from the American Jewish Heritage Foundation, based on the (technically true) claim that he descended from some of the first Jews to settle in North America. 2) Shortly after Edgar bought Ari's business, he leapt at an Orthodox customer who was about to leave when he heard Ari had retired, Edgar sticking out his hand, introducing himself as the over-enunciated "Edgar Roo-szel," which was less how he imagined his ancestors had pronounced his name, and more his attempt to give the widest possible berth to the commonplace Anglicization *Russell*. 3) Once, while meeting with a rabbi to negotiate a price for a valuable library of kabbalistic texts—some, even, in scroll form—Edgar grabbed the arm of the waiter in the deli where they'd met, asking the man to reassure him that the pastrami was indeed kosher, even though it said so on the menu, and even though the rest of the deli's clientele made the place look like a lunch break at the Wailing Wall.

The family name Rusel was the cultural totality of Edgar's inheritance from a scant Jewish ancestry, a small detachment of his genealogy on the side of his father, who was mainly German and Czech. Edgar's footnote Jewish ancestors had all immigrated to Baltimore from Belarus by the end of the 1700s, and stopped practicing not long after that. A great-something had served under George

Washington in the Revolution, as a surgeon's assistant. In Edgar's imagination, this is where the break had occurred.

Edgar thought he took after his mother, whose ancestors were English and Irish. At six-foot-three, he had his mother's size, her broad feet and freckled shoulders. But he was heir to his father's dark hair, his father's rough, blushing cheeks, his deep and jarringly morose eyes, eyes that had forced him to smile almost constantly, to avoid alarming his friends and neighbors.

Edgar envisioned Mira Sokol as a headscarved old babushka, stooped in her stone cottage, stoking a fungal hearth where iron pots hung bubbling with a rank and inedible stew. She had contacted him through email, but that meant little. She could have had some grandchild bring a laptop to her hovel. Her message had the algorithmic inflection of an online translator. She was also probably non-practicing, after decades of communism.

Mira replied to Edgar's email shortly after he finished packing. Scanning was impossible; she didn't want to risk devaluing the manuscript by releasing copies of pages "into the void." Edgar's image of Mira as a peasant evaporated.

Her reply inexplicably depressed Edgar. Or maybe he was just hung over. He sent Naama a text, telling her he wasn't coming into the shop today; he had some errands to run before flying out. Then he ran a bath and laid his body in the tepid water. He'd wanted to see Naama, to gauge her somehow, to ascertain if the previous night had been a mistake, or if in her mind it had been the start of

something. Really, he needed to ask her what she wanted from him, but he couldn't summon the will to confront her. Edgar slid forward in the tub. He submerged his head and listened to the steady lubb-dubbing of his cowardly heart.

THE NEXT MORNING Edgar walked from his apartment to the store with his rucksack over one shoulder. He could have taken a car straight to JFK, but sensed that he shouldn't wait until Frankfurt to talk to Naama. Through the plate-glass window of his store he saw her in her usual attire: gray wool slacks that showcased her heart-shaped rear end, no earrings but a string of pearls too irregular to be fake, a long band of sandalwood beads looped doubly around one wrist, all features queued up behind a fitted black blouse with a neckline not so much plunging as it was suicidal. Edgar opened the door, the brass bell jangling above him.

"August was terrible," Naama said, before he was completely inside. "I just finished the numbers." She was leaning on the glass display case they used as a front counter, reading a store copy of *Pale Fire*, the paper jacket set aside. His eyes avoided her cleavage, even though, two days ago, he'd seen her breasts bare and pendulous, and had woken the next morning, just after dawn, with his head nestled between them.

"How bad?" Edgar asked too loudly, picking up a stack of mail and fanning through it.

Naama closed the book and set it down on the display case. She never used a bookmark. She said not using one made you better remember the story. “Total net?” she asked. “Two thousand, three hundred dollars. September was only a little better.”

Edgar winced theatrically, but the shelves of books glared at him like hungry orphans. He made it through the stack of mail without finding a single envelope stamped Past Due. Naama had lit the furnace, and the store was suffused with the warm, homey smell of burnt dust. She walked around the counter and stood beside Edgar, her arm brushing his elbow. Her perfume was different, something in rose, incongruously delicate. The beads of her bracelet clicked on the glass.

“It was a fluke,” she said.

She was trying to assuage him. They’d had good months and bad, but overall profits were trending toward decline. Increasingly Edgar relied less on walk-in customers and more on providence, chasing big finds he immediately resold to universities and overseas collectors. He felt like a man hanging on to a rope tied to a rising zeppelin. At some point he would lose the store, and if he didn’t let go soon enough, he wouldn’t have enough capital to stave off his creditors while figuring out what to do next. He’d been harboring a minor fantasy of using the space to open a yoga studio, even though he could barely touch his own toes.

“A couple bad months after several good,” she said. “A

flake.” Naama crossed her arms, causing her breasts to bubble upward. Her olive skin was still flushed into copper from the three weeks of vacation Edgar gave her at the end of each summer, a color he hadn’t fully noticed until he saw her naked. “Things will get back to normal.”

“Right. A fluke. Good.” Edgar sifted through a stack of boxes waiting for FedEx. He felt the momentary courage to discuss the other night directly, but mentally recoiled before his mouth could open. He hadn’t looked her in the eyes since he’d walked in the store. Edgar nodded at the outgoing boxes. “Anything good here?”

“Signed first edition of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The three Baudelaires you bought last month. A damaged *Adonais* with a Cosway binding. Is this how you dress for travel now?”

Edgar looked down at his wardrobe. “What?” He wore a pair of sensible leather boots, dark gray chinos, a wash-softened oxford under a dark blue denim jacket so new the sleeves were starch-stiff. On Edgar’s head was the tweed flatcap he’d bought in Ireland, decades ago, when he’d done a semester abroad.

“You look. . . .” Naama paused. “Like an old-timey street thug.”

“Really.”

She laughed. “I’m sorry,” she said. “The hat I’m used to. It’s charming. But the rest”—she waved her hand up and down Edgar’s body—“This is either thug, or plumber.”

“I’m warm.”

“Hm,” she said. Then: “Oh! I almost forgot. Mira Sokol’s on Facebook.”

Edgar paused. “She is?”

Naama revealed the slightest smile. She handed him the iPad she’d insisted they use for credit card sales. “Someone with her name is. She’s pretty.”

Edgar pulled his reading glasses from his breast pocket and put them on. The profile picture of Mira Sokol showed a smiling girl, blond, her forehead gleaming in the camera’s flash. He used his thumb and forefinger to expand her photograph. She was quite beautiful, in an angular, understated way, with large, gray eyes and a small mouth breaking into a cautious smile. Naama had sixteen unread notifications. “How old is she?”

Naama shrugged. “Twenty-five? I don’t know. You want me to add her?”

“No. Please don’t. It’s probably a coincidence.”

Naama said, “Same name, same town. Says here she’s a ‘bibliophile.’ Maybe she’s your Slovak dream girl.”

The furnace kicked back on, humming. Edgar didn’t look up to meet Naama’s eyes. “Don’t hold your breath.”

“Some women like older men.”

Edgar snorted, rapidly indexing possible reactions. He handed her the tablet. “Reminds me of your favorite proverb—how does it go?”

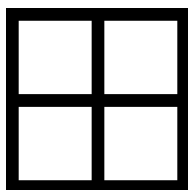
Naama smiled. “‘When a poor man eats a chicken, one of them is sick.’”

“That’s the one.”



EDGAR LANDED IN Budapest the next morning. He hadn't slept on the plane, yet he felt oddly energized. An hour into his train ride to Košice, his pocket vibrated with an email from Mira. She suggested he meet her near the city center at six that evening, at a place called Bar Tarantino. Edgar replied that he'd see her there.

As his train clacked and glided through little villages and towns, Edgar saw the same symbol several times over, each spray-painted on the blindside walls of stucco houses and cinderblock buildings abutting the tracks:



He was puzzled. The image was spray-painted on at least one building in nearly every other town. What was it supposed to represent, a window? Edgar took a picture of one as the train pulled out of the last Hungarian stop before Slovakia. He saw two more after they crossed the border.

Košice was a large city with a small, postcard-pretty Old Quarter, dominated by a gothic cathedral and an enormous opera house. Edgar walked to the hotel Naama had booked for him. He checked in and left his rucksack in his room

to find dinner. He walked the cobbled alleys of the Old Quarter until he found a nearly empty tavern. Unable to read the menu, he asked the waitress for something vegetarian. She brought him a plate of battered fried cheese and cucumber salad.

After he finished his dinner, while he was on his second glass of dark beer, his phone vibrated in his pocket. Naama had forwarded him their hotel reservations for Frankfurt. Edgar paid his check and asked the waitress for directions to Bar Tarantino.

As he crossed the main street between the opera house and cathedral, he thought, *Adjoining rooms?*

There were several people in Bar Tarantino: three men in work pants dusty at the knees, a quaking old man in a tweed coat with a death grip on the handle of a large glass stein of beer, a young woman in wireframe glasses who sat alone at a table, working on a laptop. Two boys who looked too young to drink were hunched over the bar, talking in hushed voices, their shoulder blades scissoring as they laughed at something that passed between them. The bartender was a young man with a wide face, his hair just long enough to draw into a stub of a ponytail. He gave Edgar a friendly smile and greeted him in Slovak. Edgar said hello in English, and thought he could hear the talk in the bar grow quieter. The woman from Naama's Facebook search emerged from a hall that must have led to the toilets, a manila envelope in one hand.

"Mira?" Edgar held out his hand.

The woman smiled as she shook his hand, using her elbow to clutch the envelope against her side.

“Mr. Rusel.”

She was the same woman from the picture, but somehow scrubbed of her greater beauty.

“Please. ‘Edgar’ is fine.” Then: “I thought you’d be older.”

She smiled, uncertain. “Do you want a drink?”

Edgar ordered a small lager, which came in a squat glass mug. Mira ordered vodka without ice. She was pale and lightly freckled across her cheeks, her hair haphazardly arranged, as if she’d just woken and combed it with her fingers. A few fallen strands clung to her sweater, golden and curling into esses and open ampersands. She wore tight faded jeans, canvas shoes, and a wool sweater just beginning to pill. When she moved, the hem of her sweater arched up, just a little, above the clasp of her jeans, revealing a glimpse of her navel.

Mira suggested they sit at one of the small café tables along the back of the bar, where it was empty and there was better light. She sat with her back to the wall and Edgar settled in the chair opposite.

He said, “If you don’t mind me asking, how old are you?”

“I’m twenty-six,” she said. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” he said. Naama was twenty-eight, but this girl looked much younger. Her lean body, the old sweater, the worn-in jeans and her mussed hair all lent her a vaguely teenage unkemptness. “Most of my clients are a bit older. But you look younger than twenty-six.”

She waited for him to continue, but when Edgar failed to elaborate, she asked, “Do you want to see the manuscript?”

“You brought it here?”

“No,” she said, sliding the envelope toward him. “Color copy. The originals are very old, very, uh—”

“Fragile?”

“Yes, I think this is the word. So fragile, I copy only five pages.”

“That’s fine.”

Edgar put on his reading glasses and opened the envelope. “There are eighty-nine pages in total,” she said. “But some have many, eh—” She made a motion with the flat of her hand, slicing through the air between them.

“Scored-out passages? Struck through?”

“Yes, I think so. With lines over words. Many like this. But still, able to read.”

Edgar looked at the first page and frowned. “Any drawings?”

“Sorry?”

“Illustrations. Do any of the pages have pictures?”

She seemed surprised by the question. “Oh, no. No illustration.” Mira sipped from her glass of vodka while Edgar waded through the copies. After a moment she leaned closer to Edgar. “And how old are you?”

“I’m forty-three,” Edgar said, distracted.

“Oh really? You look to me much younger. I think maybe thirty-five?”

“Hm, thanks.” Edgar held up the first page. “This is

Yiddish?”

Mira paused. “You don’t know?”

Edgar held her gaze, waiting.

“Yes,” she said. “All is in Yiddish. Like this.” She pronounced it *Yeedish*.

“Ah. Of course.” He quickly shuffled through the glossy color copies. He couldn’t find a word of Polish or German written on the copies of tattered pages that were light brown, as if soaked in tea. Schulz could not have been the author. Edgar smiled at Mira. “So. Where did you find them?”

“In a box that belong to my grandmother. I find them when she die.”

“Okay.”

“She die last month.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Edgar flipped through the papers again without pausing to focus on the writing. Mira—this was almost certainly not her real name—was either the perpetrator of or party to a scam. Many kinds of schemes and lesser deceptions were familiar to dealers of antiquities. Whoever was behind this forgery likely knew they would be exposed in the short term, and were only hoping for a little earnest money, via check or transfer. But still, the simplicity of the mistake nagged at Edgar. The error was so glaring, it cracked a fault line through his skepticism. Who would present a manuscript in a language unknown to the writer?

“You cannot read Yiddish?” Mira asked. She sounded

surprised. Edgar could smell the musk of her perfume mingled with the vapors of vodka as it purred toward him on the warm force of her breath.

Edgar looked Mira in the eyes. “No. Can you?”

“Oh, no,” she said, and paused to sip her vodka. “I am not a Jew. A friend translate a few parts for me.” Edgar was considering mentioning that Sokol was a Jewish name, but when he failed to respond she said, “The story is very interesting, I think. Is about a man who die, but come back. He die many times, and come back many times.”

Conceivably, it was the kind of story Schulz would have written. Edgar pulled out his cell phone and held it up. “You mind if I take some pictures?”

Mira hesitated. “Of me?”

“No,” Edgar said and smiled. “Of the pages.”

“Oh,” she said. “Why do you need picture?”

“So I can email them to my assistant. I can’t read Yiddish, and I can’t make an offer without her verification.”

Mira was slow to respond. Finally she nodded. “Yes. Okay.”

Edgar took a picture of each sheet and emailed the images to Naama, letting Mira see the phone’s verification that the email had been sent.

She leaned closer, until her chest rested on the table. “So, what can you pay, for the entire manuscript?”

Now it was Edgar’s turn to hesitate. If he named a figure, it would only concretize the still vague threat of danger that he felt brewing around him. Ari had pounded home

Edgar's response to these situations by rote: "Delay, then walk away. Leave before things get violent." Once, he'd considered Ari's precautions mildly paranoid, but recently he'd read an article about a scout for a private art collector, a sixty-year-old woman who'd been held in a Marseille hotel room, at gunpoint, until her check was deposited into an untraceable account. She survived to tell the *Times*, but things could have gone differently.

Edgar sipped his beer and glanced around the bar, as if casually taking in the scene. Anyone could have been in league with Mira, could have been watching them this whole time. "I have to hear back from my assistant before I know how much I can offer. Then we can talk details."

"Details?"

"Money."

Mira nodded. "Okay."

Edgar tried to look comfortable in his chair. He took another drink from his beer. "Can we meet here tomorrow, at the same time?"

THE CITY HOTEL was on the periphery of the Old Quarter in a stone, Hapsburg-era building. The lobby and rooms were modern, aggressively remodeled, as if the objective had been erasure. Edgar's room was on the second floor behind a courtyard. Actually it was three rooms, not including the entryway and bathroom, about two hundred square feet larger than his apartment in Brooklyn. The

décor was tasteful, if irretrievably European. The steel and plastic chairs looked hard and uncomfortable and the bed was wider than it was long, with a strange wicker headboard, rough to the touch. Just to one side of the front door, divided from the entryway by a half wall, was a little entertaining room with a couch, a small TV, and a wide, low table bearing a bowl of apples, two candy bars, a bottle of red wine, a bottle of white, a corkscrew, and two clean glasses.

Edgar took a bath in the large tub. His feet ached from walking on cobbled streets, and he allowed himself to soak until the water cooled and his fingertips began to prune. He got out and dried off, wrapping himself in a hotel robe. His rucksack was already packed and resting on the floor of the mirrored armoire in the entryway, next to the open safe with a programmable keypad. The manuscript was surely a fake, he thought, but at least he'd seen a new country. His plan was to check out just after sunrise and make an early morning trek to the train station. He'd board the six-thirty express to Vienna, and from there transfer to Frankfurt.

Edgar was starving, but it was past ten o'clock, and he guessed that every café in the city would be closed by now. He had stayed at Bar Tarantino for a second beer, then a third, making small talk with Mira, telling himself that he did so to help sell her on the pretext that he intended to meet her again the next day. He sat while she smoked, and he listened to her stories, making a game out of guessing which parts of her autobiography were grounded in reality

and what, by necessity, was fabrication. She said her mother was from Russia, that she felt half out of place here, in a former dominion, living her life in a parcel of a self-inflected fantasy, though how much of this was the benefit of mistranslation, Edgar couldn't say.

He sat on the couch in his hotel room and turned on the TV. He ate both candy bars while he watched an uninterrupted series of American eighties music videos. Depeche Mode, New Order, the Smiths. The camp value had been lost on him, Edgar realized, as he'd once danced to these songs in high school.

Suddenly, a knock on his door.

Edgar stood up and walked softly to the spy hole. Mira was standing there, her golden hair ablaze in the exterior light fixture. She was holding the manila envelope, hugging herself in the cold, without a coat, still wearing the thin sweater from earlier. Edgar crept to the window next to the door. He moved the curtains aside as imperceptibly as possible, glanced at Mira in profile, then looked both ways down the catwalk. She appeared to be alone. She knocked again, harder this time. The door had a security chain, which Edgar lifted and engaged as quietly as possible. Then he opened the door a few inches, the chain hanging in front of his mouth.

"Mira?"

"Hello," she said, visibly shivering. She looked haunted and lost, like a refugee.

"How did you know I was staying here?"

“I’m sorry. I saw your light was on. Should I go?”

“What do you want?” This came out more brusquely than he’d intended.

“Can I come in?” she asked, her eyes large and lax with vodka.

He felt his penis twitch and rise, the head brushing against the inside of his robe. “I was about to go to bed.”

She held up the envelope. Her jaw quivered slightly as she said, “I have more pages. For you to photograph. I think they are more to help authenticate.”

He paused. “Hold on.”

Edgar closed the door. He quickly crossed to the table and carried the candy bar wrappers to the trash can beneath the little desk built into the wall next to the armoire. He tightened the belt of his robe, exhaled, then returned to the door and unhitched the security chain. He opened the door. A cold gust blew into the room, but Mira hesitated.

“Come in, come in. It’s freezing.”

She stepped inside, rubbing her arms.

“Where’s your coat?” he asked, closing the door. He bolted the lock and replaced the chain.

“Coat?”

“Jacket.”

“Oh,” she smiled, seeming embarrassed. “I forget to take. I was in a hurry to catch you, before bed.”

“Have a seat,” Edgar said, indicating the couch.

Mira walked around the half wall, skirted the table carefully, and sat down. “Duran Duran,” she said, nodding

at the TV. “You like?”

“Uh, yes. I guess.” Rio. The band was on a yacht, off some Caribbean island. “I don’t have TV at home. So when I travel, I probably watch too much.” Even to himself, he was speaking in simplified English.

“Oh,” she said. “I like Duran Duran.”

Her accent made the band’s name sound exotic. It did something to Edgar, hearing Mira’s voice in his room. “Let me get dressed,” he said, turning away from her to fully close the sliding door of the armoire, hiding his bag. He glanced at his phone, charging on the desk. No new messages.

“Oh, you don’t have to—”

“I’ll just be a second,” Edgar said over his shoulder.

He left the door to his bedroom slightly ajar. The clothes he was going to change into in the morning—his pants, a fresh shirt, his denim coat—were laid out and waiting on the foot of the bed. He called to Mira, “How did you know I was staying here?”

“Oh. Košice is small city. And tourist season is over. So.”

So you called around, asking if anyone had a tall American staying by himself. Edgar pulled a pair of boxers over his semi-hard penis, tucking it down again when he slipped on his pants. He walked back into the entertaining nook barefoot, still buttoning his shirt. Mira sat looking up at him, her knees pressed together. She smiled. Her hair was pulled back, revealing the prismatic hardness of her cheekbones. Again, he thought Mira looked thinner and

more waifish than her Facebook picture, as if she'd been ill since it was taken. She looked at the complimentary bottles of wine.

"Drink?" he asked.

She nodded. "This would be nice."

He turned off the TV and opened the bottle of red. He filled the two glasses slightly more than halfway and sat on the other end of the couch. He decided against a toast. "So, who first told you this manuscript might be valuable?"

Mira slid the envelope toward him on the table. "My friend. He work in bookstore."

"Oh," Edgar said, his interest piqued out of reflex. "What kind of bookstore?"

"A small store. Of books are not new."

"And how did he—or she—determine this is by Bruno Schulz?"

"You ask me this at the bar. The name of Schulz is on first page."

Edgar set his glass down. "Right." He opened the envelope and pulled out ten more pages. Like the others, they were all in Yiddish. The script was sloping and slatternly, the margins filled with notes and insertions.

Mira sipped her wine. "You take pictures?"

"Yes, thank you," he said. "This is very helpful."

Edgar stood and retrieved his phone from the desk. Mira cleared space on the table and helped arrange the copies, leaning forward, flattening her breasts against her knees. When Edgar finished taking pictures he tried to hand the

copies to her but she said, “No. Maybe you want to keep?”

He held them out. “No, you should keep them.”

Her smile fell by a degree. “You don’t want?”

Her eyes were so gray, like a doll’s. “Yes, very much, but you should keep them. You never know, I might not be able to pay very much. Or as much as someone else.” Edgar spoke slowly, even though he sensed Mira’s English was better than she let on. “You might be able to find a buyer who can pay a lot more.”

With some hesitation, Mira set her glass on the table and accepted the copies. Her fingers brushed his. “You not publish?”

Edgar affected a laugh, shaking his head. “I don’t publish anything. In fact, my idea was to authenticate the manuscript, then act as an agent—a coordinator, a middleman—between you and a publisher. They have the real money. They would pay you and me. Mainly you. I would just get a small finder’s fee.” She seemed to understand. He thought of all this on the spot, trying to walk Mira away from the very accurate assumption that he’d brought with him a cashier’s check for ten thousand dollars. “Really, my plan—not to get ahead of ourselves—was to contact several publishers at once, and get them to bid. Do you know ‘bid’?”

Her brow sank, her lower lip pressing into her upper. He realized she was at least a little drunk. She said, “Maybe.”

“It means five or six publishers compete—challenge each other—making bigger and better offers.”

“Ah, yes,” she said, nodding and smiling. “Yes. I see. This is good.”

This is good, Edgar thought. *This is fantasy*. When Mira seemed unconcerned by the stretching silence he said, “How much do you know about Bruno Schulz?”

“Very little,” she said. Then: “Nothing, really. I go to school for music.”

Edgar smiled. He lifted the bottle and refilled their glasses.

“Some people say Schulz was the greatest Polish writer of the twentieth century. I agree, but there were others, like Witold Gombrowicz and Zofia Nałkowska—she actually knew Schulz and first got him to publish his letters to her as fiction. Do you know these people?” Mira shook her head. “They were also great, but very different. Schulz’s style, and his imagination, you could say, are much closer to Kafka. You know Franz Kafka?”

“Of course,” she said, smirking defensively, as if he had insulted her intelligence. “*The Metamorphosis*.”

“Yes,” he said, feeling his cheeks flushed from the wine. “Anyway, Schulz actually translated Kafka’s *The Trial*. He also taught art, and illustrated some of his stories. That’s why I asked if there were any illustrations, you know, on the manuscript.”

“Ah. Yes.” Mira sipped her wine, keeping her eyes on Edgar.

“Schulz lived in Poland. He almost never left his hometown, Drah—Drohobycz?” Mira smiled as Edgar struggled with the pronunciation. “The Germans came in,

of course, after the Russians. Schulz, who was a Jew, was sent to the ghetto. But he got protection from a German officer, this guy named Felix Landau, who admired Schulz's artistic ability and paid him—I mean, I *guess* he paid him, maybe he didn't. Either way, he had Schulz paint a fresco of fairytale images in his kid's playroom." Now Edgar was basically just reciting the monologue he'd given Naama, before she filled him with gin and took off his pants. "During the war, it was a common practice I guess for Nazi officers to take on 'personal Jews.' You understand?" Mira nodded. "This was the same time Schulz was supposedly working on his first novel." Edgar nodded at the envelope. "*The Messiah*."

Edgar took another sip of wine to wet his tongue, and, as he talked to Mira—as he *lectured* her, really, his mind humming—he reminded himself: *She is not real*. If only she was, he thought, he could call the concierge to send for champagne, he could have assured Mira she would be at least moderately wealthy, and then, after emptying two bottles of Perrier-Jouet, suggest they go into his bedroom. Everything about her posture, the way she did not take her eyes off of him, the way she let him prattle on about a literary footnote, all suggested that this was the real reason she'd knocked on his hotel room door. He was struck by an intense desire to discard all the historical and logical facts that made Mira's proposition so unbelievable. How much simpler would it be, how much more *beautiful* would it be, if Schulz, unbeknownst to any expert on modernist fiction or Polish literature, had secretly written his first drafts in

Yiddish. What a revelation, one which would transform Mira from a semi-competent fraudster into a guileless, accidentally beautiful girl, who only wanted to translate a fortuitous inheritance into enough money to buy a house, travel, maybe start a family.

Isn't it pretty to think so?

“So, Landau was fond of Schulz and prepared fake papers that said he was a gentile. That let Schulz move freely in the Aryan Quarter of the town, and would have let him leave Poland, if he'd taken the chance.”

Mira held her wine glass in both hands with interlaced fingers. She unpursed her thin lips. “So he not . . . escape?”

Edgar sighed. “No. Landau, the Nazi officer, had been quarreling with the personal Jew of a rival, another Gestapo officer named Karl Günther. Landau got pissed—mad—and shot Günther's Jew. Killed him. In retaliation, Günther found Bruno Schulz walking home one night, carrying a loaf of bread. He came up to Schulz and shot him dead in the street. Later Günther found Landau and told him, ‘You killed my Jew, so now I have killed yours.’”

“My God,” Mira said.

“Yes,” he agreed.

“And he could have escape,” she said.

Edgar nodded, lifting the bottle of red wine, finding it empty.

“Open the other?” Mira suggested, meaning the bottle of white.

This was a test. He failed. He handed Mira the corkscrew.

“Go ahead.” His phone vibrated. He ignored it.

Edgar got up and rinsed their glasses in the bathroom sink, avoiding his face in the mirror. He silently hoped he would walk back into the room’s TV nook to find Mira had stolen his bag, his watch, his phone, his passport. That would be easiest. But when he returned she was still on the couch, her hair let down and her sweater off, hanging from the edge of the table. Her white blouse was translucent. Her bra, he could see, was green lace, and also somewhat translucent, so that from where he stood he could see, however faintly, the pink of her nipples. She held the open bottle of white wine, the cork still skewered on the opener. He set the wet glasses on the table, and she poured wine into each, filling them. When he sat back down, she said, “Can I say something?”

“Yes.”

“I think you are very sad.”

Edgar paused. “You do?”

“Yes.” She shifted closer to him, the seat of her jeans hissing against the fabric of the couch. She placed her hand on the electric thrumming of his crotch. She leaned in to kiss him. Edgar let her kiss his mouth, then his neck. All he had to do was nothing.

“No. I’m sorry, but I can’t.” Edgar retreated to the farthest reaches of the couch, where the linen upholstery felt cool through his trousers. He caught a predatory glare flicker across her face before her expression recovered into a warm and drunken softness.

Quietly, she said, “Why not?”

“I have someone,” he said, the response coming to him so quickly, he only heard the words as they left his mouth.

Mira stood, embarrassed, hastily gathering her things. “So sorry. I misunderstand.” Edgar would have stood too, if his erection wasn’t tenting his pants. But as he sat and watched Mira prepare to leave, he noticed her taking much longer than necessary. How she fumbled with her purse, how she momentarily got lost in her sweater, how even the manila envelope seemed difficult to manage. He tried to see her face, but her blond hair had fallen like a veil. Eventually she gathered herself and walked around the half wall to the door. Edgar nearly offered to lend her his denim jacket, as if he really would see her tomorrow.

Mira groped and scrabbled with the security chain. Still, he could have stopped her. Finally she unfastened the chain, unbolted the door, and left. Edgar rose quickly and locked the door behind her. He picked up his phone from the coffee table and tapped the screen to see the missed message, but instead he saw the timetable he’d looked up an hour ago as he’d planned his escape. The schedule of trains running from Košice to Frankfurt. Had he checked it again, after taking the pictures? He was too drunk to remember. He stared briefly at the darkened TV, then padded into the bathroom and masturbated, ejaculating into the sink.



IN THE EARLY morning Edgar checked out of his hotel and walked through the foggy Old Quarter of Košice, past the opera house and cathedral and the little alley that led to Bar Tarantino. There was practically no one out but the jumpsuited street sweepers and drivers of little trucks, making deliveries.

The night before, after Mira left, he'd had trouble getting to sleep. Finally he finished the white wine and texted Naama, *I feel like I'm trapped in a Roth novel.*

Her reply, a moment later: *Which one?*

Edgar: The Prague Orgy.

Naama: *You're having an orgy?*

Edgar: *Ha. Not exactly.*

Naama: *Could be worse. You could be trapped in Night Train to Munich.*

Edgar: *Yeah. At least Roth can write dialogue.*

Naama: ☺

Edgar boarded the train for Vienna. Once in his cabin, with the countryside sliding past his window, he scrolled through the pictures he'd taken of the forged manuscript. He never bothered to send the second series to Naama. One photo had captured three fingers of Mira's left hand, on the very corner of the color copy, still adjusting its position when Edgar snapped the picture. Mira had small, childlike fingers. And she chewed her nails.

At a stop somewhere in the middle of Slovakia, a teenage girl climbed into his cabin, flashing a mindless smile. Her look was punk rock, like girls Edgar remembered from

Bowery Club shows in the early nineties. She wore a short plaid skirt and black tights, plum lipstick, an artfully ripped t-shirt under a hooded sweatshirt. Her hair was dyed black, one hemisphere of her skull shaved bare. When she started texting on her phone, Edgar saw she had the window symbol tattooed on the web of her hand.

“Excuse me,” he said. “What is this?” He pointed at the tattoo on her hand.

She looked surprised. “Sorry,” she said. “No English.”

“Oh. Uh, *was ist das?*”

“Sorry,” she said again, shaking her head, and quickly stood and left the cabin. The train slowed as they approached another small station, but Edgar didn’t see her on the platform.

A little before eleven AM Edgar’s phone vibrated with a new email from Naama. What time was it in New York? Five AM? He would have thought she’d be sleeping, or maybe she woke every day at dawn, to scrub her bathtub with a bottle of bleach and a sanitized toothbrush.

The subject line of her email read, *Abort!*

Edgar, Do not purchase this manuscript until you have time for further consideration. If you have already paid Sokol, contact me immediately and I’ll issue a stop payment on the check. A passage contains the word אנטיביוטיק [antibiotics]—something about that threw me off—it seemed like an anachronism, something I vaguely remembered from high school. I looked it up—“antibiotics” (as a noun, in the precise medical sense) didn’t enter usage until 1942.

Come to Bratislava!

Didn't have to look much farther than our OED for that one. Highly unlikely it would have been in Schulz's lexicon, esp. in Yiddish.

—N

Edgar typed,

Antibiotics. Nice work. Don't worry, already left Košice. No money traded hands. Schulz never wrote in Yiddish.

His phone vibrated almost instantly with Naama's reply:

Are you kidding me? Then why'd you send the pictures?

Edgar shrugged, as if she could see him through the tiny camera on his phone. He could have explained the whole thing, about trying to fool Mira into thinking he was interested in the manuscript, but instead he scrolled through his photos until he saw the picture of the window symbol spray-painted on the back of a yellow building. He attached it to an email and typed,

Naama, Everywhere the train went, I saw this window symbol spray-painted on the backs of buildings. Any idea? Gang sign? Some new cult?

He only had to wait a moment for her reply:

Edgar, These are swastikas. Or were. Making them into “windows” is how people “cover” them without using too much paint, or making ugly big black blocks hard to paint over later.

Edgar sat fixed, rereading her words. His first thought was that she was mistaken, or paranoid. Then he mentally undrew the lines obscuring the swastikas, and realized it must be true. Was this something all Jews knew, or just Naama?

He typed, *Why are you up so early?*

Naama, a moment later: *At JFK. I’m coming to Frankfurt, remember?*

Edgar: *Oh, right. Sorry.*

Naama: *We’re about to take off. Anything else?*

Edgar: *No, thanks. I’ll see you soon.*

He waited to see if she’d reply, but there was no further message.

By one-thirty in the afternoon, the train had crossed the length of Slovakia, through Bratislava and into Austria. It rained in Vienna, where Edgar took a humid tram from the Südbahnhof station across the city to Westbahnhof.

At Westbahnhof Station, he bought a ticket for the three o’clock train to Frankfurt. He decided to kill time by strolling around the station.

Edgar saw the teenagers before they saw him. Two kids, with ruddy cheeks and dark, close-cropped hair. One was in a white tracksuit and Pumas, the other wore jeans and a leather jacket, his feet in waffle-soled Doc Martens. They

were laughing and drunk, carousing in the middle of the nearly vacant train station, each with a half-empty bottle of beer in his hand. Edgar accidentally made brief eye contact with them, then turned away, but it was too late.

“Hooligan! Hey, *Hooligan!*” The kid in the leather jacket came trotting over, his boots thudding on the concrete. He reached out and took the sleeve of Edgar’s denim jacket in his hand, looking down to Edgar’s tightly-laced boots before boring into Edgar’s face with his wet, bloodshot eyes.

Now Tracksuit was beside his friend, beaming at Edgar. He pointed at Edgar’s herringbone cap with his beer bottle. “Hooligan,” he said definitively, nodding along with Leather Jacket. They were drunk, young and thin, each a good six inches shorter than Edgar, but charged with an ecstatic, muscular meanness.

“No. Not me,” Edgar said, forcing a smile. “I’m no hooligan, trust me.”

The two kids were swaying and sleepless, their clothes wrinkled from a long night. “No,” Leather Jacket said, again eyeing Edgar’s hat, his boots. “I think you are hooligan.” Tracksuit said something in Slovak to Leather Jacket, who said to Edgar, “My friend think we see you yesterday.”

“I doubt that,” Edgar said.

“No, no,” Leather Jacket said. “I think he is right. We see you in bar, in Košice.”

Edgar stiffened. Of course. The two kids who had been sitting at the bar when he first met Mira. Edgar’s heart

thumped as he glanced around the cavernous hall of Westbahnhof Station. There were only a few people milling around, two of them Austrian soldiers in camouflage, newly shaved heads and rucksacks on their backs, large duffels sagging at their feet. They were not policing the station, as Edgar had thought when he first saw them, but waiting for trains to take them either home or back to their base.

“I was there,” he said.

“Yeah, man. We know,” Leather Jacket said. Then, snapping his head at Edgar’s tweed cap. “You English? You dress like English. English hooligan.”

“No,” Edgar said. “I’m American.”

“American!” the kid shouted. He and Tracksuit traded looks, their faces bursting, as if Edgar had let them in on a joke.

“You guys from Košice?”

“Nah, we’re from Bratislava,” Leather Jacket said. “You like Bratislava?”

Edgar had only seen Bratislava once, through the train window, not two hours ago, just before he rolled into Vienna. The capital of the Slovak Republic looked desolate and hopeless, like Detroit, if Detroit was comprised of nothing but Soviet ghettos and smokestacks and ten thousand sodium lamps left burning in the gray morning. “Yes,” he said, “I like Bratislava very much. Very beautiful.”

Leather Jacket nodded, smiling, and translated Edgar’s travelogue for Tracksuit. Then Leather Jacket stepped back, to reappraise Edgar’s choice of travel clothes. “Stop

pretending you are not hooligan,” Leather Jacket said, “We love hooligans. America is hooligans. America is fascist.”

“No,” Edgar said too quickly, “America is democracy.” And then, because he could think of nothing else: “*Ich liebe Barack Obama.*”

The kids roared with laughter.

“All America is fascist,” Leather Jacket said, when he’d recovered.

Tracksuit nodded, still grinning at Edgar. “George Bush eez fascist. George Bush eez Hitler.”

“Not exactly.”

Leather Jacket said, “Where you from, in America?”

“I live in New York.”

“Ah! You a Jew, yes?” He punched Tracksuit in the shoulder and said something to him in Slovak.

“No. I’m not Jewish.”

“I think you are Jew.” Leather Jacket laughed. “Jewish hooligan! Jewish fascist!”

Edgar smiled at Leather Jacket, who was missing one of his canines. His nose had been broken sometime in the past, bent ten degrees from center. “No,” Edgar said. “America is democracy. I hate fascism.”

The smile drained from Leather Jacket’s face. Edgar watched a thought throb through a vein on the kid’s temple. “You don’t like fascist?” With his fist he thumped the meat on his chest so hard, he sounded hollow. “*I am fascist!*” he shouted, pressing his face into Edgar’s. “You got problem with *fascist?*”

His heart pounding, feeling Leather Jacket's warm spittle on his face, Edgar looked askance, as if to check the yellow LED list of departures, but really he was searching, hoping some local might intervene. The lobby was even less populated than before. Only the two soldiers remained, on either side of the station, both as still as statues, immersed in their own thoughts. A bead of sweat trickled down the back of his neck.

"Sure," Edgar said. "You got it." His voice didn't shake, but whatever liberal bravado he imagined he possessed had now shrunk and retracted into his abdomen.

Tracksuit whispered something into Leather Jacket's ear. His smile returned. To Edgar he said, nodding at Tracksuit, "He don't speak English, but he has something he want to tell you."

Smiling, Tracksuit pantomimed an action that looked like shoveling coal, only it wasn't meant to convey shoveling coal. Beer sloshed from the bottle in his hand onto the polished floor of the station. He spoke in guffawing Slovak while Leather Jacket translated: "In war, my grandfather"—here Tracksuit finished heaving his imaginary load and enthusiastically simulated kicking a furnace door shut with the sole of his shoe. "He say, 'My grandfather, in war, he kill lot of Jews.' You understand?"

"That's wonderful," Edgar said, picking up his rucksack from the floor, slinging it over his shoulder. "I have to catch a train."

"No, don't go, Hooligan!" Leather Jacket said. "Come to

Bratislava! We'll beat up Jews!"

Edgar walked away, up steps leading deeper into the train station, but the two kids followed him. Leather Jacket gave a Nazi salute, shouting, "USA! KKK! USA is KKK!"

Edgar tensed, waiting for a blow, waiting for a bottle to hit him in the back of his head. Tracksuit shouted in a deeper, more inflected register: "USA! KKK! George Boosch eez KKK!"

Edgar kept walking. Finally the kids' voices were cut off and Edgar stole a glance over his shoulder. A soldier had stepped in front of the pair, his hand arresting Leather Jacket by his chest, speaking quietly to him. Leather Jacket nodded drunkenly, still smiling.

At the rear of the station, where glass doors let out onto the concrete platforms, Edgar found a little glass-enclosed café, empty except for two Turkish girls behind the counter. Edgar walked inside and in broken German ordered an espresso and a croissant, and sat with his breakfast at a little table where he hoped he was out of sight. The coffee was okay. The croissant was terrible. He was still chewing the first bite when the kids walked into the café and stood beside his table.

Edgar swallowed. "What do you want?"

Leather Jacket spoke to Tracksuit before he replied. "You wait here, with us. Our friend want to talk to you."

"Mira?"

"Who?" Leather Jacket asked. Tracksuit said something in his ear. Then they both snickered. "No," he said. "*Mira* in

bed. In hangover, because of you.”

“I’m sorry, but I really need to go. I have to catch a train.”

“No, you will stay here and talk to Boza.”

“Who?”

The kid sneered at Edgar. “Man, you don’t know Boza Bala?”

“No. I don’t.”

“He biggest hooligan in Slovak Republic. Like Al Capone.”

“I’m going to finish this coffee,” Edgar said in measured syllables, “and then I am going to leave.”

“No, you stay here,” Leather Jacket said. “Boza in toilet, taking sheet. He finish, he come talk to you.” He took a drink from his beer and sighed with satisfaction.

A man with a shaved head came striding into the café. He was older and taller than the other two, with a dark brow and furious pink skin, his neck and fingers crawling with old tattoo ink gone green. He wore only black: black jeans, a black polo shirt, gleaming black leather boots, and a black nylon bomber jacket that hissed quietly as he moved. Edgar saw a thin cardboard box under his arm, the kind reams of paper come packaged in, and then he knew what was coming. When the man sat down across the table, Edgar felt his asshole tense away from the padded seat of his chair. His heart, which had been pounding, now hung quietly in his chest. The man issued a perfunctory smile and Edgar saw a bright flash of his jacket’s inner lining. Safety orange. The man placed the box on the table, crowding Edgar’s

breakfast. The backs of his hands were tattooed with iron crosses, the ink along the edges bleeding into his capillaries.

“Excuse me,” Edgar said. “Do I know you?”

The man folded his hands on top of the cardboard box. When he spoke, his English was startlingly soft, absurdly elegant. “You know, it’s quite odd to find you in Vienna, when you have an appointment to meet Mira tonight, in Košice.”

A nauseous dread clenched at Edgar’s intestines. He was afraid to speak, to hear the sound of his own voice.

“I am Boza,” the man said. “Maybe you have heard of me?”

Edgar remembered to breathe. He remembered the soldiers. He remembered leaving his phone unattended when he rinsed the purple dregs from the wine glasses. Mira. Edgar never bothered to lock his phone with a passcode.

“*Kaffee, bitte*,” Boza called to the Turkish girls, who’d been watching them. The girls hesitated, looking at each other. Then the shorter of the pair walked to the espresso machine. The two kids walked outside and lit cigarettes. Boza said to Edgar, tapping the box, “This manuscript, it doesn’t interest you?”

Edgar jumped as the Turkish girl pounded the portafilter, ejecting the spent grounds from his shot of espresso. He cleared his throat. “It’s obviously fake.”

Boza gave him a wry smile. “Why do you say this?”

“Bruno Schulz couldn’t speak Yiddish.”

The man nodded and shrugged, as if the gaping hole in his scheme was a trivial detail.

“Perhaps it is not work by Schulz,” he said. “Maybe you are correct. Perhaps it is work by a different writer, but it is not, as you say, a fake. I can say with certainty that it was written during the war.”

“Who wrote it?”

He shrugged. “Some dead Jew.”

The shorter of the girls arrived with a cup of espresso rattling on its saucer. She set it on the table and retreated. The man blew softly on the caramel froth, his pursed lips pushing the wispy steam toward Edgar. He took a sip. “This coffee,” he said, “is not very good.” He nodded at the Turkish girls and smiled conspiratorially at Edgar. “But what can you expect?”

He set down his coffee and leaned over to grab Edgar’s rucksack from where it rested against Edgar’s leg. Edgar watched him open the top of the bag and rifle through his folded clothing. “This is a very good bag,” he said. “You know what it is?”

“A rucksack. I think I bought it at a surplus store.”

Boza dug deeper into the bag. His hands were enormous. “Is field pack. Australian Army. Very old, but very good quality.” He gave up searching through Edgar’s clothes and opened the small front pocket on the outside of the bag. He found Edgar’s Moleskine, and inside that, Edgar’s ÖBB ticket to Frankfurt, and the folded cashier’s check for ten thousand dollars. He read the figure, his expression clinical.

“What is this, eight thousand euro?”

“A little less.”

Boza refolded the check and put it in his jacket pocket. He set the rucksack on the floor and pushed the box across the table. “This is now yours.” Edgar had to grab his plate and saucer to keep them from falling off the edge. Boza said, “Give me your phone.”

“No.”

“Edgar, you are not in a position to argue.”

“I can call a soldier. You can beat me up, but they’ll put you in jail.”

The man smiled. “Edgar, you try to report me, all I have to say is, ‘Look at this Jew who tries to swindle me.’”

“I’m not Jewish.”

Boza scoffed. “Give me your phone.”

“No.”

“Okay. Then maybe instead, you get on train. Come back with us to Košice. Would this you prefer?”

Edgar said nothing.

Boza said, “Look at it this way: My idea was to break into your hotel and have my boys drown you in your bathtub until you gave us the check. But I changed my mind.”

“Why?”

“Because you didn’t fuck my girlfriend. I appreciate this, even if I do not understand. I don’t know—maybe you are Jew and faggot?” He pulled his jacket sleeve back and glanced at a cheap digital wristwatch wrapped around a tattoo of a wolf’s head. “But it’s getting late, so I’m thinking

maybe I am too kind. Maybe you'd rather keep your phone, and maybe I just break your fingers so you cannot use."

Edgar gave Boza his phone. Boza slipped it into his jacket pocket. He lifted his little china cup and swallowed the rest of the coffee. "Thank you," he said, his smile returning. "Enjoy Frankfurt. It is a beautiful city."

EDGAR PAID FOR the croissant and the two coffees. He closed his bag and its front pocket, slung it over his shoulder, and carried the thin box to the platform. He knew that he should walk directly to the ticket counter and ask to talk to the police. Boza was probably already en route to a bank in Vienna, to cash the check. Likely, one or both of the two kids were still in the station, watching Edgar, hiding, waiting to intercept him.

Edgar boarded the train for Frankfurt. *It could have been worse.* He took a seat in an empty cabin and opened the box, setting the lid on the chair beside him. There were a few dozen pages. Hardly a novel, but something. His body rocked as the engine was coupled to the cars. The script was rushed, almost frenzied, as if the author knew his or her time was running out. The sheets were a lighter shade of tannin than they'd looked in the copies, not fragile at all, but rather heavy, like parchment. Edgar reached for his phone to call Naama, before he remembered that it was gone. The train began to roll. The explanation for Edgar's stupidity was on these pages, somewhere, its totality a secret

until Naama could produce a translation.

Edgar watched the green and white mountains fly past his window, the steep valleys turned into bowls of gold and orange. It occurred to Edgar that this box was not the first conspiracy he had walked into. Surely, Naama had been a plant. Ari had been widowed at sixty. He never remarried. Because of the store, he'd said. Was it so crazy to think that Ari had wanted to leave some safeguard for his former employee, while providing a husband for his great-niece? And if so, who was Edgar to refuse such a gift?

Edgar remembered Naama's apartment not as the austere cell of a severe woman, but as a temple to order and sensibility. The dinner she'd cooked for him—pan-fried pheasant, new potatoes in garlic sauce, steamed haricots verts sautéed with hominy and fennel—had been arranged on his plate discretely, like the elements of a chemistry set, yet the food had been almost erotically delicious. He remembered waking between her heavy breasts, the cocktail of soap and perfume and gin-sweetened sweat preserved in her cotton sheets. Recasting just a few of her traits caused whatever had been blinding him to fall and vaporize, like blocks of Tetris.

After everything, he'd still arrive in Frankfurt an hour or so before Naama. When he checked into the hotel, he'd change his email password, notify AT&T that he'd lost his phone, and cancel their reservation for the second room. Naama herself had already provided the justification: they'd had a bad month.

Edgar closed his eyes and leaned back into his seat, his wrists crossed and resting on the box in his lap. He thought of Naama. How she still smelled faintly of vanilla when he woke and lifted his head from her breasts. The way the sun shone through her bedroom window, golden in the morning. How warm her stomach felt under his hand when she began to wake and he reached out to touch her, knowing this was his last opportunity to graze the downy rise of her belly before she stirred back into consciousness, and how the touch of her skin was briefly indistinguishable from the electric pleasure of sense returning to his sleep-deadened fingertips. ☺☹



Kari Orvik @ Photobooth SF

BENJAMIN REED's fiction has recently appeared in *PANK* and *West Branch*, and less recently in *Blue Mesa Review* and *The Southern Quarterly*. He won this year's *Austin Chronicle* Short Story Contest, as well as the last *Avery Anthology* Small Spaces Prize. Recently he had the great pleasure of serving as guest editor of *Arcadia Magazine* Vol. 7, which hit the shelves in November 2013. Last May he earned his MFA from Texas State University, where he teaches freshman composition. He lives in Austin with his wife and their two boys.