

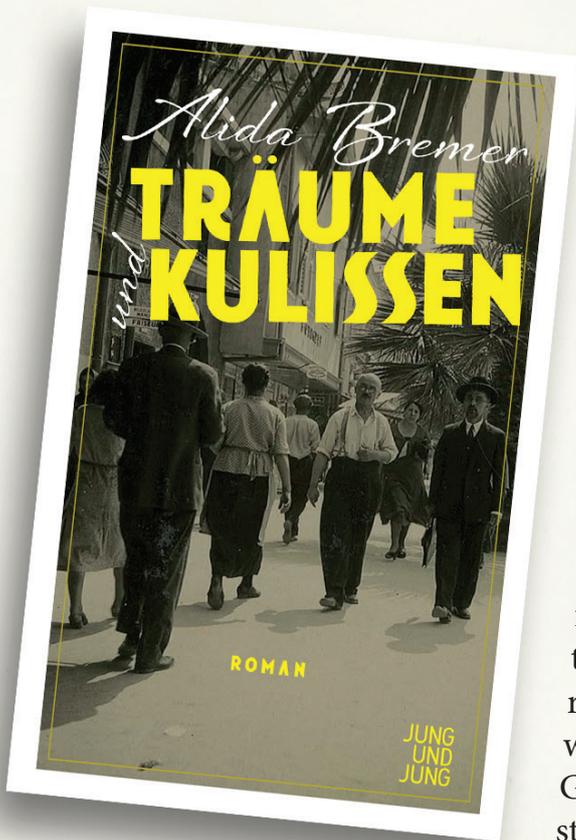


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Alida Bremer
Dreams and Backdrops

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Alida Bremer
Dreams and Backdrops
Novel



A harbor town on the Adriatic as a backdrop for dreams, which some people use for business, others for films and a few to make their fortune.

Summer 1936. Split, the Riviera of the Adriatic coast, seems to enjoy its usual colorful hustle and bustle and frivolous ease. But now it's more than peasants from surrounding villages, fishermen, and languid northerners taking the sun: Jews on the run, opponents of the Nazi regime, traffickers and spies from all over the world flit among the ruins of Diocletian's Palace. German film crews drawn by the spectacular views stoke suspicion and rumors, Italian and Croatian fascists and anti-fascists, officials from the distant Yugoslav capital and Freemasons, plot and quash

political conspiracies among smiling waiters, children, and unflappable concierges. Gun-running, love stories, get-rich-quick schemes are interwoven with stops to eat and drink and swim.

In one week it explodes. The beaches, cafés and pubs are full, cruise liners and military ships lie alongside fishing boats – and then a dead body washes up at dawn. There are few leads, and they lead everywhere. Mario Bulat begins to investigate, but everyone already seems to know more than he does. The powerful industrialist Salvatore Torchio, a member of the culturally and financially strong Italian minority, feels his two sons and their foster brother slipping away from him because they like Mussolini, D'Annunzio and Marinetti. But he will do whatever he has to to protect them from the grasp of the Yugoslav policemen. Some love affairs will fall apart, others look to the future. All the loose ends may be tied up at the novel's end – but we are still far from justice. On the eve of World War II, can there be only a happy ending to a summer story?

The Mediterranean city of Split is as much of a protagonist as its citizens. Once the emperor Diocletian ruled the Roman Empire from here. The scents of Mediterranean delicacies still waft through the ancient walls of his palace. So do whispering, plots, uprisings, and irrepressible joy at being alive – in a new electric atmosphere of uncertainty that has gripped the entire ancient continent.

Dreams and Backdrops is a dazzling kaleidoscope of Mediterranean life in an overheated era, a social novel rich in tones and colors about a world on the brink of disaster for all the promises of progress and gleaming machines. Last but not least, this book is a literary declaration of love for a city.

Alida Bremer

was born in Split 1959 and has lived in Germany since 1986. She studied Comparative Literature, Romance Studies, Slavic Studies and German Studies in Belgrade, Rome, Münster and Saarbrücken.

Author, translator, editor and cultural mediator between Southeast Europe and the German-speaking world. For her literary translations from Croatian into German she was awarded with German prizes including the Internationaler Literaturpreis 2018.

Her essays, columns, stories and poems appear in newspapers, magazines and internet portals (including *Der Spiegel*, *Lettre International*, *Schreibheft*, *Zeit Online*) and have been translated into various languages.

Her historical-autobiographical novel *Oliva's Garden* (Eicborn Verlag, 2013, paperback Ullstein Verlag 2017) was translated into Croatian and Macedonian.

Dreams und Backdrops is her second novel and, even before publication it was nominated for the Alfred Döblin Prize (a prestigious award founded by Günter Grass for unpublished manuscripts).

She lives with her family in Münster and spends time in her flat in Split whenever she can. From there she can see the sea.



1.

A gigantic fish lay stretched on its side atop a heap of fishing nets. Its belly glistened mother-of-pearl in the dawn, its black fins coming into ever sharper relief the closer Antonio got to the monster. His footsteps were slightly uncertain. He was pleasantly drunk, infused in carefree joy until a few minutes ago, having spent the night in the best company the city had to offer. Suddenly, he felt the breeze blowing off the land towards the sea. That's life, thought Petrinelli, almost sober now from the stream of cold air. One day you play *trešeta* and *briškula* all night long, served tripe in tomato and onion sauce courtesy of the cement factory director, with red wine alongside for your blood count, and the next day death can wipe you out, no matter what you do for your health.

He thought of his mother; he always remembered her when he thought he had grounds for a guilty conscience. He could be glad she wasn't waiting for him now, calling for him through the half-open door to her bedroom, asking if he'd got home safely and how he was. Despite that relief, loneliness overwhelmed him for a moment.

He slowed his steps, focusing on the enormous fish. Strange that the fishermen had just left it there. They'll surely come soon to take it to the fish market, he thought, sobering up slightly. The oily black sea washed against the quay walls and there was a clatter, whirr and screech, the sounds of anchored ships that Antonio Petrinelli had never paid any attention to before, despite being born right there in the port city. They seemed particularly loud to him now, though.

He was only a few yards away from the heap of fishing nets. They had cork floats attached around their edges, which looked like dried figs. My skull is a camera obscura, he thought, reminding him he had to turn everything he saw upside down. What he'd thought was the belly of a fish was suddenly a man's belly, his white shirt in stark contrast to an unbuttoned black suit jacket. The tail fin was clearly a pair of trousers ending in black patent shoes, while the fish head was actually a white face with traces of blood and wide eyes beneath dark hair combed back off his face.

He felt as if in a dream, except he knew he wasn't asleep but swaying through Split harbour on his way home. And he had to hurry; he could feel his stomach contents rising into his gullet. The juicy tripe, brown sauce and rich red wine – he really couldn't get away with it. Not in the middle of the city at this early hour; he couldn't just vomit here.

Those damned movies! Ever since his mother had died he'd fallen for the new fashion and was never out of the cinema. Now look what it got him. His mind was conjur-

ing up film scenes before his very eyes.

As a consequence of a spontaneous ruling by the Royal Interior Ministry in Belgrade, the city's brothels had been closed for three years now. Their owners had gone all the way to the capital in person to protest, explaining that a port town without brothels was like a brudet stew without fish, a Splitska torta without raisins or a steamship without a chimney, but it was all in vain. The biggest city on the new kingdom's coast was to be chaste and virtuous, at least officially. The women merely relocated to the dark doorways of the dank stone houses and the dive bars in the old town's back alleys, where the seamen and other clients kept an eye out for them.

Karlo Cambi, the police officer in charge of that sector, had said in an interview with the local paper *Novo doba*: 'Not much has changed for us in the vice squad. Except the waiters in the harbour bars are less friendly than the madames used to be.' The interview didn't make it out of the censor's office, so the general public never got to read his sober analysis. The chief of police, still new to the job, warned Officer Cambi about his laid-back approach to journalists but that didn't seem to bother him. The chief tried to temper his words by adding: 'You take care of the refugees and their helpers in the port instead, that's more important to us right now than the whores. And keep a lookout for communists meeting up in the night bars.' Karlo Cambi's eyes were fixed on the wall behind his boss, rendering it impossible to read what he thought of such instructions.

Three young men striding across Prokurative Square that morning were discussing this and other grievances. Their quiet curses filled the dawn: 'porca miseria,' 'porca Madonna,' 'porco Dio'. They went on indulging in vilifications of various ministers in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia – 'rimbambiti cretini,' 'teste di cazzo,' 'faccie di culo'. In the end, the three of them – actually only two of them, as the middle one was silent – called the whole government 'figli di puttana'. Then they put their arms over each other's shoulders and walked on. From behind, it looked like the trio were putting on an exotic folk dance.

The men had all sorts of other reasons to be unhappy with the politics of the state they lived in, and once they reached the square by the theatre they gave vent: It was an undisputed fact that after Italy's soldiers had performed heroic feats in the Great War, their homeland had been cheated out of important territories, to wit: Istria and Dalmatia, including their own city. It was a proven truth that Benito Mussolini was the best politician of all time. He had made Italy great again and seen through the English and Americans' foul play. It was an undeniable veracity that the Italians were a far more civilised and cultivated culture than all the Balkan nations put together.

At the last words, they patted the shoulders of the man in the middle, who they were holding up on either side. 'We don't mean you, Mauro, we know you think like an Italian. But you'll forgive us for telling the truth. Everyone knows the Italians are superior to all other nations in Europe and the world, not just the Slavs. The ancient Greeks, they were pretty good. The French too, now and then, and maybe the Ger-

mans as well, but you can forget all the rest. The Spaniards ruined the language of the Romans and mixed their blood with Arabs and gypsies. The English are stuck up and have terrible food, just like the Scandinavians with their raw polar-bear meat.' They meant to continue the litany but they couldn't think of any more nationalities, so they stopped.

It was a dead hour. Even the colonnades, arches, paving stones, shutters and walls, which otherwise heard and saw all, had nodded off. The three men walked on in silence, but when the one on Mauro's left began to whistle, the one propping Mauro up on the right joined him in quiet song:

*Giovinezza, Giovinezza,
Primavera di bellezza
Nel Fascismo è la salvezza
Della nostra civiltà.*

The city was still asleep, the passenger ships in the port dozing too. The fishing boats had not yet returned, but had someone stood by the quay wall at that hour and looked out to sea, they would have noticed the flashing lights on the horizon between the islands.

Frederick Achnitz was lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling and smoking. In one corner, spider's webs coated in dust hung like strips of fluffy black cotton. Frederick blew smoke in their direction but nothing moved. It was a self-rolled cigarette, plump with Herzegovinian tobacco. Fields and rocks, earth and bark, an aroma of singed wood and fresh hay mingled with his saliva. Ever since he found out where to get that fine-cut tobacco in Split, he had felt at home in the city. There were times when he felt he belonged there, especially when he was with Jana. Jana Pilić. Her surname meant 'chick'. He pursed his lips as if to kiss the smoke streaming from between them.

On his arrival, he had reported to the liaison to get in touch with the Adriatic branch of the Internationale. The contact man had explained how to protect himself from the police and what to keep in mind in the city. The political police in Split used pizzles; had he heard of them? Did he know their truncheons weren't truncheons at all; they were dried ox penises? Frederick wondered whether the man had never heard of the Gestapo, but said nothing.

For the party here in Dalmatia, the liaison had said, the top priority was fighting the Italian fascists, the Croatian nationalists, the Catholic church, the Serbian royalists and the Italian and Yugoslavian capitalists. The Duce was a shrewd player angling for world domination. Could he remember all that? It was important. The German comrades didn't understand the context in this part of Europe, he had often established, sadly. An assassination of Mussolini had been planned along with Italian comrades, but it had been called off for the time being after consultations with Moscow. In his opinion, sometimes bombs were the only thing that helped, but you had to respect the hierarchy if you had any discipline.

The liaison had a pointy beard and a silver earring, like a pirate. Frederick thought he was a braggart. But a communist wasn't supposed to think that way about a comrade.

In the evenings, they gathered in a smoky inn tucked between the houses in Veli Varoš, run by a man who didn't like Frederick because he thought he was a German spy – and he let it show. They spoke a mixture of Russian and German; with Jana, Frederick only spoke German. Jana had learned it as a lady's maid in Vienna.

The day before, Jana and he had eaten at the Orient taverna, pasta in a sauce of capers, anchovies and tomatoes, before they went to the pub. Frederick withstood the landlord's glare as they joined the others at the long table. His male comrades patted him on the shoulder and hugged him, the women sang a few songs but left early. Their parents and brothers seemed more willing to tolerate them being in the communist party than staying out late. 'People are very Catholic here,' the liaison had told him on the first day, spitting on the floor. Only Jana granted herself the freedom to stay out longer. Aside from the family she worked for, there was no one in the city she had to answer to. She wasn't a child any more, she'd told Frederick, and when she thought about it, being a socialist meant bourgeois morals weren't obligatory for her anyway.

Despite the evil eye from the landlord, Frederick was happy. Jana and he waited until the last of their friends said goodbye and then strolled around the city as it slowly came to rest in the warm night.

They passed the terrace of the new restaurant on the eastern bank, where they could hear a jazz orchestra playing. They tried a few tap-dance steps, laughed, walked on, looked for a quiet spot. The sea sighed serenely, indifferent. Anyone born on the coast, Jana declared, was never alone: 'The sea is always there – when you're near it you feel it uninterrupted, and when you're elsewhere you carry it inside you.'

There was no one to be seen in the port, only occasional gulls waddling importantly back and forth. The ships' masts creaked and grated, the wooden beams of their stems groaned, the sails were silent. They found a hiding place, a stone staircase set into the quay wall, with slippery moss coating its last step. The couple perched halfway down, only visible if someone bent their head and spotted the glowing tips of their cigarettes.

Split gradually settled down to sleep. The waves rose to their feet and pulled back idly, echoing the city's rhythm. In the accent of a Viennese lady-in-waiting, Jana told him about her parents' death, her siblings scattered across the world. It was the night in which lovers tell each other about their lives.

Time passed and they got up again. The starry sky stretched above them and the dark sea surrounded them, as though they were on a ship. Frederick let Jana climb the steps before him, ready to catch her if she slipped. A gust of wind wafted the scent of Neptune grass over to them. Two or three waves washed against the quay wall, then the sea fell back into its leisurely breathing.

Later, Frederick couldn't remember what he'd heard at that moment. At first, he

thought the gulls were awakening or something had startled the rats. But it was human voices, calls, perhaps a moan, something down by the fishing boats.

Jana had pulled him towards the old town centre, to the entrance to Diocletian's Palace, down more steps to the vaults, where they slipped into the dark. It stank. Frederick was prepared to feel something disgusting on his hand, he didn't know what, perhaps a slimy substance; but his fingers touched only firm cold stone. They crossed as if wading through an octopus's ink sac, climbed up to the peristyle and then even further up the stone staircase leading between the two lions to the cathedral entrance. A cat skulked behind the sculpted lion on the right. It stretched its head just like the stone pet of Saint Mark beside it. A few steps later, they were in the colonnade surrounding the former royal mausoleum.

'That stink down there was the old rubbish,' Jana whispered. 'People threw their rubbish in the cellars for centuries and hoped it would dissolve of its own accord.'

The witness to their embrace, the black granite sphinx guarding the peristyle on a high wall to the right of the staircase, stared into the darkness with her blind eyes.

Antonio Petrinelli had got home and thrown himself on the bed fully clothed. He dreamt of red wine turning to blood. In Catholic services, the priests used white wine so the symbolism didn't seem too blatant. Or so they didn't stain their robes. Or to mark them out from Orthodox priests. Whatever the case, he preferred red wine, personally.

Mauro and his companions had also got home. All three had disappeared into their rooms, glad no one would dare wake them in the morning. They had trained their family well. Mauro gave a tortured smile at that thought, then fell into an uneasy sleep.

Frederick had walked Jana to the gate and watched her vanish into the darkness. She had crept into her room, undressed and fallen straight to sleep, covered only by a sheet. Her alarm would go off in two hours' time. She was due to meet her friend Dora at the fish market.

Frederick had until ten to appear at the Hotel Imperial and introduce himself to the filmmakers arrived from Berlin. The thought that they'd all be amazed when he soon disappeared filled him with a mix of fear, pride and impatience. The Oceania Shipping Company representative with whom he'd enquired about the Marseille-Barcelona-Valencia-Alicante line – claiming he wanted to get to Alicante – had assured him the next ship would weigh anchor on 14 July. The People's Olympiad in Barcelona was scheduled to start on 19 July. He turned onto his other side and tried to imagine his film. Then he gave up and thought about Leni Riefenstahl.

It was the hour of dreams.

That dawn on 7 July 1936, dreams were dreamt not only in Split, a city on the margins of Europe, on the coast of a slim channel of the Mediterranean. They were dreamt in stone cottages with crooked roofs in Dalmatian Zagora and in the cabins of boats on

the North Sea, they were dreamt behind windows opened onto the backyards of Berlin and in the collective apartments of Moscow.

It was the age of dreams.

They were dreams of light music and light clothing, of fast bucks and fast cars, of health and medicine, science and technology, swimming and flying, of Olympic victories and cameras that would provide the best footage of those victories.

They were dreams, as well, of the justice of a classless society, of the brotherhood of workers and peasants, of strong states and stronger leaders, of flight to America and fleeing to wherever else.

People watched films that resembled dreams.

They argued over whether films were dreams or dream interpretations. And whether films ought to be poetry or prose.

2.

A grey figure knocked at the door of an apartment on the third floor of number 5, Ban Mladenova. Nothing stirred. Why should it? It was just before five in the morning, a time at which even sleepwalkers, dementia sufferers and the chronically sick find sleep in the summer. The knocking man shifted his weight from one leg to the other and began to knock more loudly. After a while he drummed against the wooden door, but still nothing moved inside the flat. He gathered his courage and slammed his fist down five or six times in close succession. A door on the second floor opened and a sleepy voice called from below, 'Who's there?'

The man being sought was Detective Superintendent Mario Bulat, whom the trainee police officer, once he had gone down a flight of stairs, informed of a body in the basement of the police building, brought there by someone half an hour earlier. Doctor Radman had been sent for, but the trainee could say no more than that and he would now return to the station, if the detective superintendent would allow. Mario Bulat gathered up his clothing and tiptoed out of the room where his neighbour Irena Ugrin was breathing evenly, to get dressed in the kitchen. The trainee had stared in horror at his underpants, as if it were indecent not to wear pyjamas to bed in the summer. In the bathroom, he added a few drops of peppermint oil to a glass of water, gurgled at length, ran his fingers through his hair and splashed water on his face.

His wife's death had left Mario baffled, driving him into Irena's embrace a few weeks after the burial. She had brought up a bowl of fried anchovies marinated with oil, lemon, onions and capers, and asked, 'Do you have any bread, Šjor Bulat?' Thankfully he did have bread, which they later dipped in the marinade while Irena read Rilke aloud. There was a certain poem he absolutely had to hear, she said. It was about Orpheus, who was so stricken over his wife's death that the gods allowed him to fetch her back from

the realm of the dead. On their way back to the living, he turned impatiently as Hermes tiptoed after him with his dead wife Eurydice. That was against their agreement, and his wife, 'that so-beloved woman', descended forever into the eternity of the beyond. Mario thought the saddest part was that the dead beloved had no longer known who the man walking ahead of her was, as he turned to look at her. Her steps, the poem said, were 'impeded by the long windings of her shroud'.

Now there was a corpse awaiting him at the police station. With nothing to go on as he strode through the empty streets, Mario Bulat's money was on a political connection. Unease had prevailed in Split's police headquarters over the past few weeks. The criminal division was not affected, but there was no way to overlook an unusual fraught busyness in the political division. Agents put in frequent appearances, some arriving from the capital as reinforcements. Bulat often left his office door open since the building could get unpleasantly warm, which meant that men he didn't know occasionally stumbled in, apologized and beat a retreat.

Spies and informers were common enough in Split. Since the beginning of the century, the city had been bristling with Austrians, Hungarians, Turks, Bulgarians, Romanians, Ukrainians, Albanians, Italians, French, Serbs, Russians, Greeks, Germans, Czechs, Poles, Brits and even Americans. They all maintained their own networks of snoops, who reported to their clients in whichever countries – the only question was, what? At times, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia seemed like a shipping hub where not trading goods were reloaded but political ideas, crazed nationalisms, adventurers, agents and refugees.

Mario Bulat had served under the Austrians until the Great War broke out. During the war, he had to fight for them without ever understanding why; everything changed in 1918. All of a sudden, he was expected to serve those who had toppled the old monarchy.

The acting chief of police was a tad too eager to demonstrate his loyalty to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. He mourned for the dictatorship that had held the land in its iron grip from 1929 to 1934 – until the king was murdered in Marseille's harbour. The man's last words, allegedly, were: 'Preserve my Yugoslavia.'

The international press had interpreted the assassination of Alexander I Karadorđević as a bad omen for peace in Europe. Hadn't the Great War begun with an assassination in the Balkans? Officials in Berlin refrained from comment. London and Paris soon agreed: The behaviour of the Balkan tribes meant nothing for the rest of Europe; they were welcome to bash each other's heads in as much as they liked down there. Doctor Radman disagreed: 'The Balkans are always seen as backward when we're really the avantgarde. Where we once were, the others have yet to arrive.' But Doctor Radman often said incomprehensible things that weren't worth arguing over.

As the ranks of supporters for the joint state of Yugoslavia swelled in Split, so the number of its opponents grew likewise, leading to not infrequent coffee-house scuffles.

That seemed to trouble the chief of police less than the red peril.

It was not communists who had killed King Alexander I Karađorđević but nationalists, yet that argument failed to convince the chief of police. His most recent instructions to all departments were for strict surveillance of all communists arrived from the German Reich. Mario Bulat hoped the dead body was not one of them, and had nothing to do with them either. There were allegedly dozens and dozens of them in the city. They had fled the regime in their country, but they had chosen the wrong destination; they weren't welcome in Split either.

Doctor Radman stood with his back to the entrance, leaning low over the stone table. The basement room was pleasantly cool but it smelled of blood and death.

'Three stab wounds to the chest,' the doctor said by way of greeting.

'Darko Barić!' Mario Bulat was shocked at what he saw on closer inspection.

'Handsome face, flawless body. Fate doesn't spare the decent people. *Habet sua quemque dies*,' said the doctor. 'Every man has his day.'

Radman worked in the municipal hospital, just across the park from the police headquarters. He had studied medicine in Vienna and returned to Split as a junior doctor. Having been taken into a British field hospital in the Great War, where he was allowed to continue his training once the Brits found out he was a medic, he became a doctor of all trades. He operated and delivered, cleaned wounds and set splints, dissected corpses and prescribed herbs that he picked by the wayside in the surrounding mountains. He wrote occasional articles for the local newspaper, brimming with citations from world literature and Latin maxims. 'Latin ought to be every European's second mother tongue!' He wore tailored shirts, always with a polka-dot silk bow tie; he was never seen without it, even at home.

There were things that were never said out loud, though everyone in the city knew about them. The old stones whispered them into sleeping ears at night, and sometimes the chatter ran away with itself. One rumour had it that Doctor Radman and Petrinelli the pharmacist were not merely neighbours and representatives of two complementary professions, but were also in a relationship. Holy mother of God! They'd always known that men did it with men. The ancient Greeks who once lived in the area enjoyed such scandalous practices back then, apparently, to say nothing of Diocletian's Roman soldiers. And yet people always thought such a thing inconceivable anew, beastly and disgusting. Especially because decent types were forced to let their imaginations run wild on the matter. There was nowhere to see anything of it, and no one to speak to about it. The fact that this supposed dalliance was between two men of great significance for public health made the issue all the more piquant. There were few doctors in the city, and even fewer pharmacists.

'The man died four to eight hours ago,' said Doctor Radman.

‘Stjepan, when did the body arrive?’

‘Pretty much four on the dot,’ answered the constable waiting to be addressed. ‘But arrived isn’t the word. It was delivered. The gates were locked. There was a knock at four and when I opened up, there was this fisherman with his barrow. I thought the man was drunk, at first. The barrow didn’t have fish in it, just the body.’

‘Who was he? And where is he now?’ the D.S. asked.

‘Fran Nisiteo. You must know him, everyone knows him. He was dead set on going home to his daughter so I had to put him behind bars. Then I examined the place where he found the body. Nothing but blood.’

‘Is he really that stupid or is he play-acting?’

‘I put him in the drunk tank. Just for a few hours, I promised him. Before that, he helped me lift the body out of the barrow and onto the table.’

‘Why would he bring us a dead man if he’d stabbed him himself?’

‘I’ll make sure the corpse gets to the hospital,’ said Doctor Radman, inspecting the murdered man’s hands through a magnifying glass.

‘I’ll have to go and see his mother,’ the detective sighed.

‘Ah, mothers, our Dalmatian mothers. Fluttering around their sons like panicked guardian angels. Or like crows. Did you know Šjora Petrinelli, who died recently?’ asked Doctor Radman as he plucked at the corpse’s right hand with a long pair of tweezers.

‘The pharmacist’s mother?’

‘I was at his house earlier. He had terrible dreams during the night. Probably from a rich meal and a drop or two too much to drink. He’d been at the Torchios’ in the evening, but the food didn’t suit him. He dreamed of a giant fish that turned into a man’s corpse. I permitted myself a dream interpretation: fear of castration. The fish is his deceased mother and the corpse is he himself.’

‘With all due respect, Doctor Radman, that sounds more like a witness statement. I’ll have to talk to Petrinelli.’

‘He’s asleep now, I gave him valerian drops. He won’t be going anywhere, don’t you worry.’

‘Was Barić at the Torchios’ as well, perhaps? His clothing looks like it.’

‘And on the subject of fear of castration: Mankind has seen it all before, down the generations, including incest, *horribile dictu*.’

‘You’ve told me about Oedipus, Doctor, several times. And about the Viennese doctor who interprets dreams.’

‘Freud, his name is Sigmund Freud. I once had the honour of showing him around the city. He wanted to see the sphinx. His wife bought some very fine fabric from the Turkish traders at the bazaar.’

‘The sphinx? Because of Oedipus?’

‘Certainly. That’s his specialist subject. Curiosities between mothers and sons made him famous. Go ahead and tell Antonio I told you about his dream. He has nothing to hide, I’m sure. Toodle-pip, gentlemen,’ said the doctor, not without one last searching look at the corpse.

The constable had understood not a word of all that. He wondered whether a transformation had taken place in Doctor Radman’s head, from sense to nonsense, like when wine turns to vinegar but no one knows exactly why.

With a cautious grip, he pulled the sheet up over the dead man’s face.

At around nine, Frederick Achnitz dug around in his bedside table for the biscuits Jana had brought him a few days ago. Then he made a cup of Turkish coffee the way he’d learned here in Split: He put a cupful of water in the copper pot, brought it to the boil and mixed in a teaspoon of sugar and a heaped spoonful of coffee. Brown foam shot to the top. He leaned forward to breathe in the scent. Jana, Jana, Jana, he thought.

Still leaning over the coffee pot, he began to roll a cigarette. The men here were so good at rolling cigarettes that he’d grown inclined to perfect his own skills. He liked the way they emptied their shot glasses with a jerk of the head, too, while they argued over the revolution and its consequences – one lot lauded everything that came out of Russia, the others distrusted Stalin. Frederick was among the first group. He’d been seventeen when the news of the October Revolution had astounded him: Someone had actually dared to put into practice what he in his youthful outrage considered right and proper. He had found a Russian émigré in Berlin, who taught him Russian in exchange for German lessons. He claimed to have been one of the four cameramen who worked on a silent film by Sergei Eisenstein.

His friends from Split loved to laugh. They pointed fingers at his spectacles, telling him the golden frames made him look like a *buržuj*, a bourgeois. Or they mocked the short trousers he turned up in one day. They said he looked like a little boy in them. Not even the highest temperatures could persuade them to wear shorts, they told him, and he laughed with them. They’d watched Laurel and Hardy in the Eden cinema; the audience had laughed their heads off. His new friends warned him: There were just as many crazies here as anywhere else. They’d seen *Triumph of the Will* together, too.

They were amazed when he told them he had once met Leni Riefenstahl. He wished he had her mastery of the camera, he explained, but he wouldn’t have filmed Hitler that way, like he was ascending to heaven like a god, only the clouds behind him. Not from below; he’d have shot from above or from a side angle.

He’d be leaving for Barcelona in a week’s time to make a socialist sports film at the People’s Olympics, he told his friends. He would present the athletes as the workers’ brothers, frame them in the rhythm of the struggle for a just society. Jana had taught him how to get rid of wasps by lighting roughly ground coffee in a cup. He would open

his film about the People's Olympics with a scene showing crazed wasps fleeing the brown smoke.

There was a knock at the door. It wasn't Jana, as Frederick suddenly hoped for no reason. Jana never came at this time; it was the liaison. He was wearing dark glasses, crumpled black trousers and a dirty white shirt, the sleeves rolled up. His pointed beard was freshly trimmed, the silver pirate's earring dangling from his lobe.

'I came to warn you.' The liaison spoke Russian with the hard accent of a southern Slav. 'There was a murder at the harbour last night. They'll accuse us, so there won't be any meetings for the next few days. It would be good if you'd stick to your Germans and not talk to anyone else. Including Jana. If I know our police, the first arrests will be fishermen and harbour workers. Then their agents will work their way down the lists they've made of our members. Jana is bound to be on a list, so keep away from her, please.' He turned as if to leave, then changed his mind. 'And keep away from Joseph Krause as well. He's with that Harry Piel's film crew, staying at the Pension Schiller. He's a Gestapo informer.'

Alone in his room again, Frederick rolled another cigarette. He wouldn't tell anyone about the groans he and Jana had heard in the harbour. Certainly not the pirate! The very way he said he should 'stick to his Germans' got his goat.

Since the October Revolution, the communists were seen everywhere as the greatest peril; perhaps that was why they were so secretive. They suspected one another and every one of them was vulnerable to the party control commission. The news from Russia had been contradictory, recently. Frederick decided not to think about that before he got to Barcelona. Things would become clear there, with the sports meeting bringing together the entire Internationale. He hoped. He put out his cigarette and left the flat, diving into the hot, noisy city as though it were made of water, not old stones.

Though Doctor Radman's remark that Antonio Petrinelli had dreamed of a man's corpse as a fish sounded strange, Mario Bulat noted down the pharmacist's name as a possible starting point.

'The pharmacist? Dreamed something? Have you succumbed to that fortune-telling nonsense too now? Listen, Bulat, it's important you don't disregard the communists and their comings and goings,' was the chief of police's comment when he presented his early findings.

The Barić case was only a few hours old, and Mario Bulat didn't quite know who else his boss considered a fortune-teller or why he already suspected the communists.

'It's too soon to make deductions, but of course I'll bear them in mind as well,' Bulat replied.

'You know where our political priorities lie at the moment.' The chief of police hadn't yet finished his warnings. 'We've made a few arrests and impounded compromising

material. Brochures full of fantasies of a new society with no nations and no private property. Dangerous ravings!

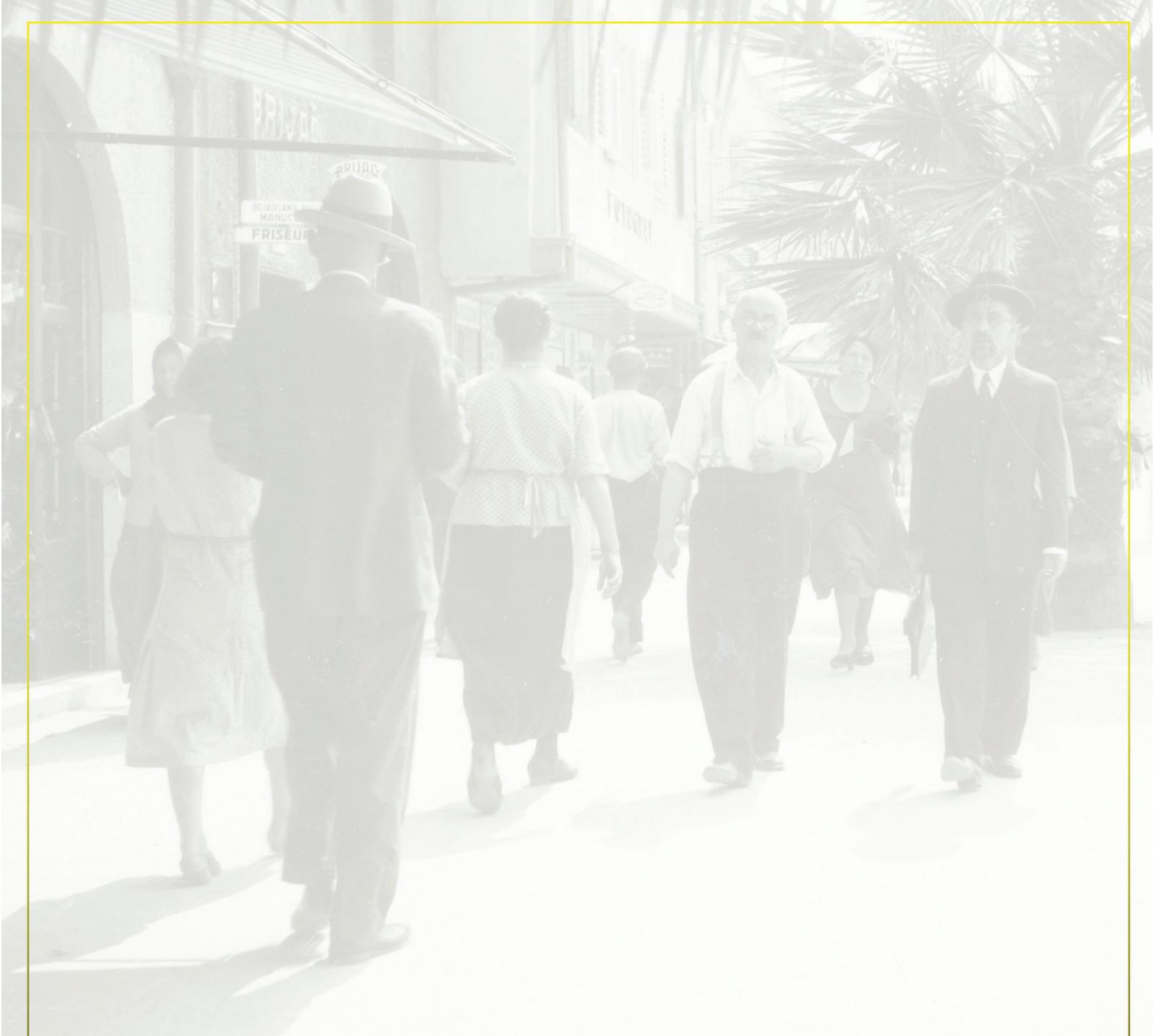
Admiral Philip Andrews was the first person Mario Bulat had heard talk about the peril emanating from Bolshevik Russia and threatening the entire world. That was sixteen years ago now. The American had been called in to pacify the situation in Split after an incident where the captain of the Italian battleship *Puglia*, Tommaso Gulli, had died. At a dinner after the tumult, he had taken Bulat aside and explained why the it was not the nationalists who presented the greatest danger, despite everything, but the communists. In their envy of the wealthy, he said, they wanted to make everyone in the world equally poor.

In the meantime, the *Puglia's* full gracious rump was adorning Gabriele D'Annunzio's villa on the western shore of Lake Garda. It was a gift from Mussolini to the pro-fascist poet, whose writings Irena did not much appreciate, although she did describe one of his poems, in which rain fell on a pine grove, as decent. 'Which is it?' Mario Bulat had asked her. 'Is he any good as a poet or have his escapades cost him his place in Parnassus for all time?'

'Both,' Irena had answered.

'Don't forget the tenacity with which the communists pursue their aims. Barić owned five fishing boats! The reds are know-it-alls who kill for their ideals,' said the chief of police, launching his hand at Bulat to shake.

The investigation could begin.



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