

Revolutions

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Juri carries his glass of Coca-Cola and walks toward the table where Rakov and Strobl sit. Their conversation falls to whispers when they see Juri. Juri knows it's about him.

Juri sits at the next table. Lehna comes out of the bathroom and throws her skinny arms around Rakov's and Strobl's thick necks. They do not realize she's making fools of them. Juri sees it, and that's why Lehna has no effect on him, even the times she jumps in his lap and hangs on him.

Lehna pretends not to see Juri. She and the men whisper to one another and laugh with their heads together. Then they look up, as though just noticing him.

"How's it going, Juri?" Rakov asks.

"Come sit with us. There's something we want to tell you," Strobl says.

Lehna looks up. "Hi, Juri."

Juri sits down at their table. Lehna leaves the two ironworkers and slides into Juri's lap. He feels nothing, not even her weight. Her short hair smells like cigarette smoke. She puts her arm around Juri's neck and, leaning forward, picks up his glass of Coke. She takes a long swallow and licks her thick, sticky lips.

"It's just fucking Coke. You a butterfly, Juri?"

The men laugh. Lehna faces Juri and stares at him, nose to nose, cross-eyed. "Huh? Are you?"

The men laugh. Juri's legs feel numb. Lehna weighs more than he remembers.

Strobl reaches across the table and fills Juri's half-empty glass with American whisky.

"Come on, Juri. Let's make a man out of you."

Lehna takes a sip and grins. She puts the rim to Juri's pouting lips and tilts the glass. Whisky-spiked Coke dribbles down the sides of his mouth.

"Drunks and fools please only themselves." He pushes Lehna away. The glass slips from her hand and smashes on the bare wood floor beside Rakov's chair.

"You little bastard."

"Don't you have somewhere to go, Lehna?" Strobl asks.

She flicks her head, whipping the ghost of her hair behind her. She forgets her hair is short; Strobl made her cut it.

Lehna leaves, stepping to avoid the broken glass, as though striding from stone to stone to cross a stream.

Strobl waits until she is out of earshot. "Politics is not women's business."

"No revolution is built without our sisters' shoring the walls."

The older men laugh. "Maybe *after* the revolution, Juri. Right now, women are good for only one thing."

"What's that?"

The two men look at one another in theatrical silence, in mock disbelief.

"I don't remember being that stupid at twenty, do you, Rakov?"

Rakov smirks. "At his age, they'd think I was queer if I didn't lay three women a day."

"Promiscuity poisons the blood of the revolution."

"All right, Juri. But everyone's got to live a little. Right?"

Rakov nudges Strobl, and both men laugh.

“It’s fine to quote the scripture, Juri, but revolutions are fought in the real world.”

Juri’s father says things like that. His father isn’t much older than Strobl. Men grow soft; revolutions grow weak. Next month, on Juri’s birthday, the revolution will also turn twenty-one. Yet neither will be granted manhood until the old men step aside — or until they die.

Strobl motions him to come closer. “It’s time you proved yourself, Juri.”

Juri leans his head toward him. Whisky and sweat. He watches the older man’s face. Strobl’s cheeks and chin bristle with graying stubble. A whitish scar along his jaw; a short one over his eye, three wrinkles creasing the corner. His eyes glint like burnished bearings.

“Are you listening, Juri?”

“Yes.”

“I want you to go to this address.” Strobl scribbles on a matchbook, shows it to Juri and then sets it afire in the ashtray. “You might be there two or three days. Pack food and a change of clothes — dark, like you’ve got on.”

Strobl scrapes his chair away from the table and gets up. He raises his hand a little. “See you, Juri.”

“See you.”

Juri watches the flame consume the last corner of the matchbook. As it goes out, a tendril of smoke rises from the charred paper. He takes Lehna’s cocktail straw and stirs the ashes.

He wonders what they will ask him to do. Juri is scared, but he is ready. He has waited for this moment, the chance to prove himself, as a step ascending manhood. He has not yet wondered,

as Rakov and Strobl have, whether there are more steps than there are days in one's life to climb them.

By the look of the floor, with a splotchy stripe running parallel to each rafter, the last occupant of *Do Fasada's* garret was a manic artist smeared in grays and whites who arranged his canvases in perfect rows.

A noise among the shadows startles Juri. He spins around.

Pigeons flutter to the floor like scraps of paper. They bob their heads, strutting in the rectangles of dingy light from the windows. They peck among the curled leaves and pieces of glass from the broken pane.

"It's bird shit," Juri mutters. "Just birdshit."

He clomps across the bare floor and stands at the other window. He rubs the dirty glass with his sleeve.

A smudge-faced moon lodges in the crook of a naked tree. Its black branches lash the bruised face.

Juri looks down at the garden enclosed by walls. His breathing is tight and shallow; Juri is afraid of what he will be asked to do. He has never had to kill anyone.

When Juri looks up from the overgrown garden again, the moon has fallen from the tree and tumbled over the rooftops. A band of starlight glimmers, fierce tattoos on night's black skin.

He spreads his blanket between stripes on the spattered floor, between the skewed rectangles cast by the streetlamp on the slatted ceiling. He shuts his eyes and hears the other tenants of the old hotel scurry beneath the rough floorboards.

The room is cold. Juri curls up, hands beneath his armpits. All the doors have been sold for firewood.

The night turns slowly.

The floor creaks. Juri sits up and listens. A man steps past the window, his blurred face illumined for an instant in the shaft of light.

“Juri?”

Juri knows the voice from party meetings. The man’s name is Petak.

Petak looks around the dim garret. At first he doesn’t see Juri sitting on the dark gray blanket.

“Why didn’t you answer?”

Juri shrugs. He cannot say why. During his vigil, he has discovered the intimacy between darkness and silence.

Petak leans the rifle in the nearest corner. The rifle is wrapped in butcher’s paper like a leg of mutton. Petak walks to the window and gazes out.

Juri rises and stands beside him, shivering.

Petak turns to him. “You are not the first, Juri. We all go through this. The next time will not be so hard.”

“Next time?”

“If the revolutionary council has its way, most of the aristocracy will be allowed to return.”

“Why? Why now?”

Petak wags his head. “They are old men. Some say we are a nation whose identity has been pasted over with billboards. They see Coca-Cola and Big Macs everywhere.” He shrugs. “Maybe it’s only the nobility’s money they want to prop up our national bank.”

“A revolution can sell only its integrity.”

“We all agree. That’s why Strobl wants it stopped. Prince Žaba is only the first to be granted his visa. But we’ll make sure he’s the last.”

Petak pounds his fist on the sash. Putty crumbles from the corners of the panes.

“Did you know he writes poetry about the revolution? They say he does not sleep with women. That’s reason enough to doubt him, eh, Juri?”

“Those whom the revolution excludes shall lead the next revolt.”

“Let’s hope you serve the revolution as well as you quote it.” His gold-edged teeth flash Petak’s smile. He puts his hand on Juri’s shoulder. “Just do your job, Juri. Then you can go home.”

As he leaves the garret, Petak touches the rifle wrapped in butcher’s paper and string.

Juri lies down on his blanket. He listens to Petak on the stairs, to the rats in the walls and the pigeons at the broken window.

Juri cannot sleep. He unwraps the rifle. The rustling paper scares the pigeons. They circle the gabled room and settle in a far corner. Juri raises the swollen sash.

The rifle is greasy. Juri wipes his hands on his dusty black jeans. Down on one knee, he rests the barrel on the shit-caked sill. He raises his shoulder, holds his breath and peers down the sights. The garden is choked with weeds and twisted, shapeless shadows.

Juri sets the rifle beside him and lies down again. At last he sleeps.

Revolutions demonstrate that in time all that's possible happens, but sooner to those who build fortresses against it.

The sun shines in Juri's face. It filters through his eyelids and awakens him.

He sits up in the rectangle of dusty light and crosses his legs so that all of him is within its golden borders. The sun warms his black Levi's and leather jacket. Cupping his hands on his knees, he shuts his eyes and raises his face to the sun. Soon he is soaked to the skin in the stream of autumn light.

A pigeon flutters onto the sill and re-awakens Juri. He takes an apple and a wedge of cheese from his knapsack. When he is finished, he flings the core to the pigeons on the other side of the room. Each pecks it twice, and leaves it to the flies.

Juri hears the squeal of the iron gate enclosing the garden next door. He crawls to the open window and peers over the sill. The fountain splashes, but its music does not reach him.

A young man has entered the garden. Juri knows it is Prince Žaba without consulting the creased newspaper photo Petak left him.

Juri stretches to reach the rifle in the corner. He raises it to the sill and squints into the long scope. A leafy breeze blows the smell of oily metal into his face. His greasy finger rests in the curve of the trigger.

The prince is handsomer than the grainy photo suggests. His hair is nearly blond. It glistens in the light, falling to his shoulders.

He is dressed in white military trousers and jacket, gold buttons up to his chin. The cut of the uniform stresses his wide shoulders and narrow hips. In his hand is a white cap with golden braids and emblems. The prince raises the cap and stops. He turns the cap around in his hands, examining it, and then flings it into the thicket of leafless hedges.

A drop of sweat stings Juri's eye. He squints at the shimmering white image. He hears the fountain now, spilling into the dark pool, light into darkness, a sound like sobbing and laughter.

Juri sets the rifle down and slips to the floor beside it. Pulling his knees to his chest, he crouches in the cool shadow beneath the sill.

He waits until the iron gate clangs shut. The pigeons stir, and settle back among their gray conspiracies.

Juri spends the afternoon pacing from sunlight to shadow, sweating then shivering, growing alternately firm and unconvinced and, finally, resolute. He knows he will have to die.

Leaning at the window, Juri stares down at the dark pool of the fountain. He imagines Žaba standing before the revolutionary council. The prince makes fools of them. He looks like a young rock musician who, merely by donning their uniform, mocks the military men who sport such spangles. His mockery is without subtlety, yet they are too convinced of their importance to consider the young officer insincere. They are like Rakov and Strobl. And Petak. Old men trading laments in the taverns. Men who disown their failures and compromises. Men like Juri's father.

Drunks and fools please only themselves.

Juri sits beneath the window and pages through his dog-eared scripture for a more consoling quotation. He knows killing a man will transform him into someone he'll no longer recognize in the mirror. He will have to live in that new man's skin and be as different from himself as a grown man differs from a child. Yet he is the same person.

Juri is no longer afraid. He knows the cost of the tribute demanded of him and knows he will choose to pay it, even if it means murdering the man he used to be.

The gate squeaks. Juri closes the book and crouches down with the rifle.

The prince moves into the cross-hairs. He has undone the top buttons of his jacket.

A gray shadow passes the scope. Juri thinks it is a pigeon, but realizes a man in a suit has come up to Žaba in the garden. The man stands like a servant, erect with a slightly bowed head. Juri cannot hear what they are saying above the splashing water.

Žaba takes off his jacket, one sleeve turned inside out, and hands it to the man. Then the prince sits on the ledge of the terra-cotta fountain and drags off his tall polished boots. Standing, Žaba drops his trousers and steps out of the rumpled heap. The man collects the boots and trousers, and the prince sends him away.

The servant leaves the garden with the white jacket and trousers folded over his arm, with each boot, toe forward, in the proper hand.

Juri's knees are sore; his face aches from squinting into the rifle sight. He slides his finger from the trigger. Then he sits on his heels and rests the butt of the rifle on the floor. He slides the scope from its mount and crouches again at the window.

The prince is alone. He pulls off his T-shirt and shorts and socks and steps into the fountain pool.

Juri shivers.

The prince sits beneath a stone maiden who pours water over his head from a miraculous pitcher which never empties. His long hair streams into his face; the sunlight splashes over him.

Juri thinks of putting his hand on the prince's smooth, hard skin, letting the water lick his oily fingers. He dreams of standing next to him, feeling the heat from his skin and the coolness of the water. Juri bathes him, washing away the smell of the old men's vodka and stale cigars, the smell of antiseptics and decay.

Purified, the prince rises. He steps out of the fountain. The man in the gray suit, turning his head aside, brings him a towel.

Juri remembers the words he has been seeking and recites them aloud.

I refuse! — the revolution's first cry.

Žaba wraps the towel around his slender waist and follows the man in the gray suit out of the garden.

Still crouched at the window, Juri rubs his thighs and sits down. He wraps his arms around his legs and presses his sweaty forehead to his knees.

Juri realizes he must protect the young prince from the drunken old men for whom life is long and bitter. But Juri has no idea how to save himself.

Juri wants to hide or run away. He has spent his whole life waiting for the old men to tell him what to do next, and now he does not trust them.

All his life Juri has felt too strongly about things. He suspects the gesture is theatrical, his desire to offer himself to the revolution. His father always advised caution and compromise. But Juri jumps in before he can swim.

The squares of sunlight no longer creep up the wall. They grow dim with the last twilight and fade into the gray plaster. Juri sits in the darkness until the streetlamps below rekindle the dirty window panes.

The sacrifice will not be the one Strobl has chosen to offer up. Juri will exchange his life for Žaba's.

The gray shapes of the pigeons mill in the shadows, drawing nearer in wandering circles. They are no longer afraid of Juri, as though he were already a ghost in an empty garret.

Juri devises his plan in silence and sees what he must do. As in an old black-and-white film, Juri's imagination projects the movie of his brief life and noble death on the rough plaster walls.

When the last light flickers out on the prince's ruined estate, Juri will creep down the stairway of the *Do Fasada*. He will watch the street from a crack in the weatherbeaten door to make sure the UHO is not watching him. Then he will dart across the deserted street and bound over the garden wall.

He steals into the rundown estate through the unlocked cellar door. The rooms are like museum exhibits. Juri finds the prince's bedroom at the end of a long carpeted hallway on the second floor. He stands at the foot of the bed and looks down at Žaba in repose. His heart pounds in rhythm with the pulsing darkness.

Juri wants to slip beneath the covers and lie next to him for warmth and comfort.

The white jacket with the gold buttons hangs over the back of the chair beside the bed. The jacket glows in the moonlight flooding the room. Juri drops his leather jacket on the seat of the chair

and puts on the white jacket. He looks at the prince; his fingers want to touch his cheek where the moonlight kisses it.

Juri rushes from the bedroom. He pulls too hard on the door, but it merely whispers shut behind him.

Juri finds his way out of the house and catches his breath beside the still fountain, standing among the frozen ghosts of the overgrown garden. He paces, but never steps outside the icy light of the moon. He waits for Strobl to storm up to the garret and finish the job Juri has failed to carry out.

The barrel of the oily black rifle slips across the moonlit sill. Juri sees the rifle from the corner of his eye, but he neither moves nor turns his head.

The shot rings out. A pain like a hot brand tears through Juri's chest. His knees buckle and he falls to the ground. The dew-soaked grass prickles the back of his neck. His blood, glistening black in the moonlight, spreads across the front of the white jacket. His shirt sticks to his skin.

Lights flash on in the windows. Their warm glow splashes into the garden, but not a ray reaches Juri. He hears shouts. In the naked earth beneath him, he feels the tremors of running feet. He cannot breathe. His chest is bound tight, as though a load of earth rested on top of him.

They find Juri in the garden. Žaba looks down at him, at the red stain on the white jacket.

Juri's breathing eases, but maybe he has only stopped breathing.

Strobl is long gone by now. Juri no longer worries about the prince's safety. Now they will take precautions.

Žaba kneels down beside him and slips the blood-smearred note from Juri's fingers. Juri feels his touch, firm and gentle. He hears the rustling paper as Žaba unfolds the note.

A revolution is forged of a thousand private revolts.

Juri feels life seep out of him and trickle into the ground. His fingers grow numb, even to the cold. His fingers grow long and thin, and slip like tendrils into the softly breathing earth.

The pigeons fly up into the rafters. His own voice awakens him from the sweet daydream of death.

I want to live!

Juri jumps up and stands at the window. He looks down at the empty garden. Though he daydreams how bravely he will save the prince's life, Juri knows this is not the sacrifice the revolution, his revolution, demands. It is only what the old men want, to offer up a young man's life. They do not care whom — all young men! But the sacrifice is worthless, squandered in homage to false gods with gray beards.

Juri replaces the scope and sets the rifle in the corner. He lies down on his blanket and waits. He waits forever, listening for the sound of Strobl's heavy footsteps on the empty staircase.

Many hours later, well after midnight, Juri hears the creaking steps and the thick-soled boots. Juri's eyes are accustomed to the darkness. He sees Strobl enter the garret without looking around. Strobl keeps his left hand in his coat pocket, and stands at the smudged window like the cardboard silhouette used for target practice. He does not see Juri sit up on his dusty blanket. Strobl calls for him as though Juri were in the next room.

“Juri, you son of a bitch. Where are you?”

Juri rises noiselessly. But the floorboards groan and Strobl turns to face the sound.

“Lost your nerve, eh, Juri?”

Juri is a shadow. He says nothing. His black clothes and blank expression make him unreadable.

“You failed, Juri. Žaba is still alive. You failed the revolution.”

The revolution fails the moment it succeeds in justifying oppression.

“Cut the crap, Juri. The revolution is more than quotations. It’s about living what you believe. What you did — failing to obey my orders — is treason. I could shoot you now and no one would blame me.” He waves his hand as though stating a casual fact.

Juri hangs his head, looking down at his black boots and the bare floor. He learned the posture of contrition under the weight of his father’s solemn lectures.

Strobl stands erect. His voice resonates in his stern posture. “I came to finish the job. I watched Žaba leave the estate earlier tonight. He could be back any minute. Where’s the rifle, Juri?”

Juri stuffs his hands in the pockets of his black jeans and hunches his shoulders.

“Get the rifle, Juri, before I lose my temper.” Strobl takes the revolver, blue-black and oily, out of his coat pocket. His elbow at his hip, he aims the gun at Juri.

Juri cannot move. His fear stretches each moment into a sleepless night.

Is this how he is to sacrifice himself for the revolution? To Strobl and Rakov and the old men?

“No!”

“You’re a fucking traitor, you know that, you little bastard? Maybe Lehna’s right about you. You’re no more a man than she is. A fucking little butterfly.”

Strobl raises his arm and cocks the revolver.

A shot explodes, deafening in the empty garret. The panicked pigeons fly up into the rafters. Their wings beat against the beams, the plaster walls and other madly beating wings. A haze of gunsmoke and a whirlwind of feathers fill the room.

Strobl falters, stumbling backwards to the wall. His legs slide out from under him; his heels scrape a trail in the droppings from the frightened pigeons. Strobl's head slams into the wall and he slumps to the dirty floor. A stain, glistening wet, spreads across the front of his dark shirt. His mouth hangs open, but not a word spills forth. His eyes are round with disbelief, yet he does not blink even once. He drools like an old man, spit dribbling from the corners of his mouth.

The trickles of spittle turn to blood.

Žaba steps from the shadows into the hazy half-light. He walks over to Strobl and bends down to lay the rifle across the dead man's lap. Lifting Strobl's arm by the sleeve, Žaba drops the bloody hand onto the warm, oily rifle. He stands up and turns, smiling at Juri.

"I doubt my father had this in mind when he sent me to the military academy. I never thought I learned anything useful."

Juri cannot speak. He lowers himself on one knee beside Strobl. He did not wish for Strobl's death. But he is not sorry for it. If Žaba had not waited with him, Juri would now be sitting in a puddle of his own blood.

Žaba touches Juri's shoulder. "We'd better go."

Juri looks up at him.

The prince wears the extra pullover and the other pair of black jeans from Juri's knapsack. They fit him well and the prince likes how they feel. He asks Juri if he can keep them.

Juri nods wearily, as though he doesn't care. Žaba's pale, smiling face and light hair seem disembodied, floating in the darkness. Juri feels light-headed, as though he is disembodied too.

Žaba bends one knee, puts his arm around Juri and lifts him to his feet. He leads him to the doorless doorway of the garret.

They turn back to face a noise behind them. A pigeon flutters down from the rafters to investigate Strobl's bootlaces. The pigeon is pale, pale gray, almost white.

They both think of the note Juri folded and sailed across the street to the prince's garden like a paper bird. They think of the chance, on which everything depended, that the wind carry the letter and release it at the prince's feet as he walked barefoot in the garden in the light of the rising moon. This chance would dissolve, leaving their fates undisturbed, if they dared to speak of it.

Žaba slips his arm from Juri's waist and tucks his hand in the back pocket of his new jeans. To reassure himself of its reality, Žaba touches the carefully folded letter.

Like the order it hopes to replace, the revolution is light and shadow. But those left waiting in darkness, those whom the revolution excludes, shall lead the next revolt.

In the vestibule of the *Do Fasada*, Juri and Žaba watch through cracks in the door to be certain the street is empty. They are about to leave when they hear loud voices, a man's and a woman's. The couple turn the corner, supporting each other in the four-armed embrace of drunkenness. It is only because they dance the same drunken steps that they do not topple one another into the gutter. They shamle past the *Do Fasada*. Juri recognizes Lehna and Rakov.

Some have betrayed the revolution as thoughtlessly as a dishonest lover dreams of new loves while the old love lies next to him.

But Juri knows he is not one of them.