

Igor Štiks

Elijah's Chair

Translated from Croatian by Tomislav Kuzmanović

The Manuscript of Richard Richter

Prologue

I would like to write down here everything that has happened to me in the past couple of months. I have become less and less convinced that I will survive it. Perhaps the writing that I am embarking on, this listing of facts that I am about to begin, is merely a way of postponing the end. But I realize now that it is impossible to continue with life once we discover that it is based upon a lie, a deception, a fraud behind which, we learn too late, the truth lies waiting like a snake. We step on the snake precisely at the chosen moment and it bites into the weakest flesh and releases its poison, the promise of a long and painful death. Those whose lives are vanishing beneath their feet often grab hold of anyone's hand and it often happens that they drag down with them the very one who offers help.

In my case, however, it was not just any viper that lay in wait for me, but the particular kind that beneficently allows its victim to choose the moment of death. There is no antidote. There never will be one. The chosen moment waits somewhere at the end of this report that will chronicle the life of a man born twice. Lately, you see, I have begun to believe that I was born twice: the first time in Vienna in 1942, and the second time in Sarajevo half a century later.

This is the record of that second, long and painful, birth.

The Blue Notebook

1

My hand moves across the paper with difficulty. I hesitate. I do not know how to tell my story, to include every detail, every moment, every event no matter how insignificant in order to lay out all the available evidence. For the small and seemingly unimportant things are the very material that forges the weights on the scales of destiny. Up until now I was a skillful reporter of the destinies of other people, a cunning compiler, "a witty narrator," as I was insistently called. But today, well, today I stand helpless before the material of my own life, an existence in which the lives of those whose drama gave birth to me are woven into those whose lives I will soon turn into drama. Sometimes it is the very same people. For the truth did not only find me. The snake still lies in wait for others who stumble upon it along their way. Perhaps it would be best to end it all right now, to take this poisonous knowledge to my grave, to depart without a word just as I did not so long ago.

But I tried that. I tried to pull the trigger. But I couldn't. I still can't. I am sitting at my desk and can no longer stop the story that waits to spill from me like lava from an ancient volcano. The last thing that will ever spill forth from it. Then it will be easier for the crater to burn out, to be extinguished forever. And yet I feel a writer's block rising up before all these facts whose flow can no longer be diverted, shall we say, to authorial intentions. The bitter material resists novelistic creation, the craft I learned in my youth. I learned it well, well enough to teach others, thankful apprentices who do not know and will probably never learn that all the so-called knowledge they draw from my books is not worth the paper it

is written on. Precisely so. And yet it is hard to break old habits. Which is probably why I cannot enter the story of my own life, cannot step on the path that leads to its end without hesitating, without at least attempting to lend some order and sense to all of it. To shape the material. It is as if I still dream of my future readers.

What I am recording here is an attempt to put down the events that shook the edifice of my life, to present the surprising discoveries that led me into a world that perished with the death of my mother Paula Richter née Müller – I never met her as she died soon after my birth – and with the suicide of my father Heinrich Richter. One accidental – how I am beginning to despise that word – discovery announced these fateful truths. It took place in Vienna in April of this year, 1992, and it appeared suddenly like the tip of an iceberg, whose invisible and naturally much larger mass waited for me in Sarajevo. I would crash into that iceberg at the incredible speed of fifty years of lies. This alone might make someone take up a gun and, I confess, that is exactly what I did the moment I returned from Sarajevo to Vienna in the second week of July. But the gun now rests here on my desk next to the hand that writes these words. It remains calm as an executioner who ponders neither the condemned nor the righteousness of the sentence, but does his job assiduously and without question. Perhaps these notes are also an attempt to justify the escape this gun now points toward. I do hope that what I am about to write will at least earn me some forgiveness, if only perhaps on the other side of the grave.

Yes, yes, I know. All of it should be taken to the grave immediately. And yet I fear that there is no coffin spacious enough. Perhaps that is the purpose of this writing – to free myself of the excess of luggage that Charon, in any case, will not accept into his boat. For it is the Styx that I shall soon be crossing. But how did it all begin? When did the ball of yarn begin to unravel? And who pulled the damn thread? I'm looking through the window of the hotel room into which I moved in complete anonymity after my return from Sarajevo. Below me, Naschmarkt hums. Young, apparently happy, voices rise up to this room where a disturbing story begins to take shape in the calm of a late summer afternoon in Vienna. I experience this summer calm with a painful unease because my every thought carries me back to the city that disappears as I write; the city to which I now know I belong despite the brief time spent in it; the city to which I have always belonged despite all the years during which its existence was nothing more to me than a geographical fact, albeit one that possessed a dash of universally-known historical significance. A city, in other words, not so different from many others. Photographs lie scattered on my desk. The ones that are dearest to me I have hung on the wall above the desk and I need only to raise my eyes to see the buildings near Tito Street, the banks of the almost dry river the unusual name of which I would grow extremely fond, the broken roof tiles and shattered glass on the cobbled Baščaršija market, Ivor's smile, the balcony where Alma stands, looking down at me with accusing eyes.

Did she ever suspect?

Alma...

I say the name rarely and when I do, I do so quietly so that God, that ingenious peddler, will not crush me to the ground. So that I will not hurt her again.

Who would have guessed what lay before me when I packed my suitcases at the beginning of April and decided to return to Vienna after so many years in Paris? Richard, I thought to myself then, you are pushing fifty, and Vienna is a city fit for such an age, a city that will offer you the tranquility, quiet and leisure that you need for the mature phase you are entering with so little extra luggage. The serenity, order and predictability of Vienna are precisely what you need, old boy. So buy yourself a ticket and take the first train home to your old Aunt Ingrid. She's the only mother you've ever had and she has long ceased hoping for your return. Back to Vienna! Back to the city that would soon become my tomb. For

Vienna is not a city of taste or measure, tranquility or spiritual satisfaction as we have so often been told. Vienna's appearance and its people are deceitful. Vienna is populated, in fact, with the immortal demons of the past. They emerge on the quays of Donaukanal. They crawl from the city's sewers. They fall from its rotten facades, from chests of drawers abandoned on the street, from the suits of dead gentlemen. They walk out of coffee houses, the witnesses of disasters that have been foretold and planned above creaky old tables. They hold plaques testifying to destroyed buildings, erased lives. They replace the signs at the crossroads, or, simply, sleep soundly through it all, soothed by the darkness of the crumbling walls, until some clumsy hand, seeking the full force of revenge, awakens them. That is my Vienna. It is tomb for Richard Richter and he walked into it willingly. Like a trap. A mistake. A hammer falling at the wrong place.

It is true that I arrived in Vienna with very little luggage and no one saw me off at the Gare de l'Est, except for the driver of the taxi. There were no tears, nobody to wave goodbye. I didn't keep holding my head up to the window until the contours of the city I loved so much disappeared. No. There was nothing like that. I can only say that the moment I stepped on the train that would take me back to Vienna forever, I felt almost no excitement about the fact that one life had just ended. I was far more intrigued by the thought of return, of turning a new page in the very place I once knew like the inside of my pocket and where today I do not know a soul. I have been told that I am still known through my novels and other books, that my photo still hangs in the city's bookstores. And yet I thought it was interesting that a new chapter should begin on old foundations, that entering this new life would be like entering the house of an old acquaintance, cheerful and unfettered. I hoped that this new beginning would turn out better than the end of the long stage to which I had just said goodbye, shaking hands with a man I'd never seen before, to whom I paid my bill in Paris.

I give a sour smile at the thought of me standing alone at an almost empty platform, of me bidding adieu to an anonymous taxi driver and boarding that train. And yet I was oblivious to the fact that the show had already begun and no one had warned me that I was its main attraction. Everything that happened before that moment had been an invitation to go another way, an invitation I had refused without thinking. I walked tall into my own ruin. Perhaps I exaggerate. Perhaps it is only now that these signs appear like clear messages. Perhaps only now these details have reached the surface of my restless mind and assumed some higher logic. Now even the fact that my wife, Marianne Berger, left me a couple of months before my departure, seems ominous, like a carefully planned move in some kind of devilish *mise en scene* the victim of which I would soon become. Though unfortunately not the only victim. I probably go too far. Kitty, as I used to once call her, was right to walk out on our long failed marriage, our dead love, our empty partnership. I no longer hold anything against her for that and yet I still don't have the strength to pick up the telephone. I am certain she watches the news every day and imagines me dead, lying on some Sarajevo sidewalk (another victim of a insidious sniper) in a city whose name she mispronounces. Unfortunately I am unable to call her, not any more after the vortex that began spinning nearer after she left me pulled me in with the most terrible force on a May day in Vienna.

But I absolve her of all guilt. I know that my misfortune had been long predetermined, written down, and Kitty's departure only announced its beginning. It has a precise date, this beginning, April 6, 1992. The day I left Paris. The day when, in the distant southeast, the misfortunes began in the city of Sarajevo, a city I had never visited but where I would have to be reborn in order to learn the dark truth of my existence, a truth that had been waiting there for me all these long years. Sarajevo, a city that

would offer me the lips of a woman one last time and reveal the despair and fatality of that love, a city that would show me only one way out, only one exit. But all the same, the thought that this city will survive – even if the barbarians besiege it for a hundred years, even if they raze it to the ground – makes me happy. My hope is that it will survive along with those who are now closest to me, the ones that I have abandoned without warning, without goodbye, abandoned like a coward or, worse, like a traitor. In my own defense, I can only say that I had no choice in the matter.
No choice at all.