

The Marathoner

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Chapter 3

Vienna

The Vienna City Marathon. Date: mid-April. A medium-sized European marathon. The weather is favorable: a tricky and changeable period of light rain and weak sun. The terrain is even, with wide spacious alleyways and squares, minimal curves and bottlenecks. Ideal for setting personal records. Frequent cheer stations and one of the most beautiful starting points. Number of marathon competitors: 4,000.

You've become a member of a group. It's made up of atoms of unconnected individuals that move all on their own. They train alone. They fight with themselves. They're unconscious of others around them. And it's the only group you put up with. You shy away from all others.

Marathoners.

The other members of the lower castes don't interest you. Half marathoners. 5k runners. You only count marathoners. Else you'd have to add another seven, eight thousand to the Vienna four. That's about twelve thousand people at the starting line. A crowd that is strictly divided into castes. Even within marathoners, further into boxes based on predicted speed; sub-castes.

Here and now, at the top of the pyramid. Elsewhere, a lower caste for the rest. Trail runners. Ironmen. Ultra marathoners. A wider field of possibilities for self-destruction. You've discovered a whole new world. Where the laws of thermodynamics don't apply. A world which destroys itself to be rebuilt. It cancels itself out to get upgraded.

Ignorance and madness had formed in Tomo. A winning combination for things like this. If only not for the third thing. Confusion with numbers. That was disastrous. For things like this. It cancelled everything else out. One minus brings it all to nothing. But Tomo was again pleased.

Maybe the solution is in the madness?

His whole life, every holiday and weekend away and family trip and celebration and christening and Catholic holy day, he had to go to Šolta, and spent all that time there riding his bicycle. Over the whole island. All the important life things found him on his bicycle.

Later he got off of it just to run. He had just enough in his legs not to stop before the finish line. His madness showed itself by taking things just as they came. Never anything outside of or behind them.

Tomo doesn't care, as long as he's on the move.

He once ran a half-marathon that, due to less than ideal terrain, consisted of four laps. Tomo miscalculated and, instead of turning for one more lap of five kilometers, ran through the finish line. Completely indifferent, he passed through the finish zone before the openmouthed audience, triumphantly greeted everyone and sat down and helped himself to the treats in the tent.

Because of his typical confusion with numbers, he wasn't aware that the display over his head showed a result just a few seconds short of the world record. Because of the madness that was normal for him, he did not eat or drink differently in the tent when they then disqualified him, took his medal, struck him from the list and undid his half a year of training...

Tomo didn't care, as long as he was on the move.

The judges laughed at him, but at least half of them certainly with a sour smile—out of envy.

If he could write songs, his marathons would be sung like the working class blues, in the style of Dylan.

The slow, sullen rhythm that deserted summer streets unwind with, which lead to one of the construction sites where you spent your summer breaks; that the morning trams roll with, which you took to the suburban storage units during exams; that, long after college, the shutter of the main door rolls down with, in the late evening when you're the last closing the shift at the warehouse...

The sullen rhythm of heavy legs and a bag dragged to training, the same at every opportunity, because only work maintains the illusion that salvation is possible or that everything happens for a reason. There's acidic concentrate in the bag, sweaty clothes from yesterday that in the evening you'll just shake out on the balcony, and stuff in fresh ones. They pile up, together with wages and pay, it's all the same boring consumption as working class blues.

The first kilometers will unwind sullenly and heavily in a spasm on your face. But the heaviness will start suddenly to subside, if you hold out for a while. And just like that, it'll start to peel away and you'll be splashed with a kind of lightness which, when you come to the end of the track, you'll think you dreamed. Like the short dream of a tired worker about a tropical vacation, a dream he's shaken from by a boot fallen from a foot raised on a stool.

Everything has its era, its time, its rhythm.

Like running.

When someone coexists with that rhythm, feels it and accepts it, they invest minimal effort for the same results. You get it right by keeping a set speed over distance training. Just a little change in the intensity in some places or an slight overall increase would bring on a collapse. A collapse in the sun, somewhere in the desert between two points, with few passersby, kilometers away from the first water source or trail's end.

A year has its rhythm and schedule. Running in the winter in rain and wind, the peak of strain in March and a pre-spring marathon after which comes a short rest period. Then again a slow rise and the peak of strain at the end of summer for an early-autumn marathon. The book was handed in in autumn, awaiting the first instructions for finishing over the winter, spring is waiting, it'll come out by summer.

A day, too, has its rhythm and schedule. Morning workouts: early, before breakfast, compelling the body to get up early into maximum propulsion, and liters and liters of water forcing its purification. Writing late in the evening: when the intensity of emotions are at their peak, and physical activity at its lowest, somewhere in the depths of a mine collapsed by the day's exertion titters a small gadget sending its last messages in code. That's what's worth writing down.

That's how the body gets used to the assigned parts of the day and types of strain. It wastes less and accepts everything more easily. If you listen to it well.

And then, there is only one sort of enemy. That which disrupts the rhythm.

You'll soon learn that it's everyone else but you.

You take root in your trail with your workouts each day. You become its kin, you sense its every incline, bend, smell, direction of the sun and current of air. In the eyes of the passerby you are just a part of the background. Inconspicuous. No one addresses you, no one turns to you. Sometimes they don't even let you pass. You've become an item in the trail's inventory.

And then, you notice the rest of its inventory.

Faces along the trail.

A woman that never moves.

She's always ready. She's in a tracksuit, with all the bells and whistles: tennis shoes, sweatbands, a hat, sports glasses, headphones, a decorated rucksack with bottles, gels, accessories bursting from it. Fully equipped, always starting from a different part of the trail.

Sometimes her starting point is the concrete spot by the parking lot, sometimes the earthy spot right by the city exit, sometimes the construction site sprouting up from the middle of the trail. At every starting point, fully equipped, she takes a warm-up position, stretches, warms up, puffs out big breaths, rolls her shoulders, and... never moves. On your way back after the first lap, she's again in the same spot, but this time as though she's talking with someone. Steps forward with a slow gait, and goes back. Stomps in place. Talking to someone. Preparing, in fact, for a conversation (she comments on herself or corrects what she'll say when she makes the call). She takes out her phone for who knows which time, taps the screen, looks at it, looks for a suitable angle she's not reflected in... and never calls anyone.

On and on like this each workout, at least four times a week, for ten years. On the trail there awaits you a lost woman whose path has no beginning or ending. On a trail like that, every point is a beginning and an ending. On a trail like that it doesn't matter where you are. You never go anywhere because you aren't going anywhere. A perfect expression of futility, she's situated on your path like a road sign of danger ahead.

Faces along the trail.

A veteran with a wolfhound that leaves a smell behind him.

A man that people make a wide arc to go around, even those who don't know to, and those who do know do so in an even wider arc, and looks terrifying. Tattooed, bald, two meters tall, an unhealthy-looking face, a slightly relaxed lower jaw, his impression intensified by the wolfhound that accompanies him. Some say he has been known to become cheery when he talks about dogs, and at the right moment. He loves physical contact, though he's utterly unaware of his own strength. His supposedly friendly handshake feels like an easy knockout in your shoulder that'll all but blow you off your feet.

You seldom run into him on the trail, but the fear of an encounter is always there, so it means nothing to you. As far as you're concerned, he's always on the trail, somewhere, concealed, ready to strike, to stop someone, question them about their workout and—in parting give his well-intentioned knockout. In the city it's another story: there he walks in disguise, sometimes in the remnants of his old uniform, not speaking with anyone. He doesn't stop. He only knows and acknowledges people from the trail. Though he runs slow and short.

The veteran is always on nerve pills that alleviate the effects of the war. A flabby body and jaw, softened by the effects of diazepam, but he has no problem with direction. That's where the wolfhound thinks for him, leading him in a straight line along the edge of the trail, pulling him forward with the leash. The veteran has other problems. He doesn't feel when the muscles holding in his stool loosen. So they provide an unpleasant smell for him, like a reminder of his trauma.

On and on like that every workout, for ten years now, his smell is a reminder for you that you can't avoid your problems by running. They keep behind you like a trail people recognize a fugitive by, whose efforts are futile. Fear, trauma, rage. You won't leave them behind you like the barrier intersecting the trail or the tree towering over it. Maybe you'll just grow a little more numb so you can more clearly comprehend their size when you find yourself face to face afterwards.

Faces along the trail.

A father who's had a stroke, who his sick daughter leans on.

Sometimes you sleep while you run, sometimes you imagine and lose control over your steps, sometimes from the sweat or the sun you can't see clearly.... And you collide with people who don't know etiquette or the rule to keep to the right on the path. Because of them you'd have long ago stopped being careful. But you can't. Because of two fragile bodies that will float up from the bend in the clearing, almost at the city exit.

With a stooped gait, the body further elongated by the ends of a coat that it doesn't protrude from (an odd garment gathered at the back, and stretched at the buckled ends), an old man with a stone-like face, a slightly crooked expression, walks on tiptoes as though he could topple over at any moment. Because of this, one side of his body swings. The other, right side is stonier than his face.

On that side leans his daughter with severe black hair, of uncertain age. Her body is in its forties, but the face is still in puberty, pulling the dead sleeve of his coat and leading him hard, dragging his right leg. She's forever in a wide knitted vest and the bottom part of a black tracksuit that flutters in the dragging of her leg. Unlike her father, her face has an eternally gentle smile. Because she's with him on the protruding trail that in a curve encroaches onto the ocean azure flogging the sun, the gentle breeze and the dust of the waves that crash against the rocks.

On and on like that every workout, at least four times a week, for ten years, they're accompanied by a clashing web of inextricable emotions. Respect, guilt, admiration, pity,

awe, warmth, tenderness... You don't know exactly what to do before those two saints of persistence: you bow, or just nod. Or you keep on, unworthy. It's a sign that you'd like to have hagiographers or hagiotherapists explain to you. And write it down. It would be a holy book that would encourage and comfort you.

Your workouts have become regular, regular has become habit, habit has become addiction.

For any addict, the best drug comes pure. So run without any additives.

Like Pero.

Pero is a painter in his fifties. Half the day he climbs stairs, a hundred times up and down, sometimes on scaffolding too, he studies a thousand hues of the color white. The second half of the day he rests his eyes in the greenery of Marjan Park. And down its kilometers.

Pero Painter does not know of any pills for the better utilization of fat deposits, electrolyte drinks, gels for quick lift, or protein shakes for the renewal of worn-out muscles. He only knows of coffee before and beer after running.

Pero Painter is closest to you because he uses his own drug in its purest form. You take his Spartan approach and allow yourself no relief. You've already written down the price you have to pay: everyday exhaustion for a year until the Vienna City Marathon. Relief would be a devaluation of the currency you've half saved in your pocket.

Besides that, you're pushed by the knowledge that Pero Painter the Spartan can do it all.

A day without training is a day wasted. A day without writing is an irreversible waste of time.

You mark wasted days in red on the calendar. After each one you punish yourself with a twofold burden. They say that you've entered the running zone, you don't know what that means. The only things you notice are the symptoms of a disease that isn't severe, it just takes a long time to be cured of. Or not at all.

You schedule the wasted days in advance, it gives you the illusion that you're in control of your obsession. The wasted days are joker cards: you have the right to one in fifteen days, two a month. Those days you have the right not to write a word, not to run a kilometer.

The running zone. The writing zone.

You unite two black holes that your time gets wasted in. To maintain, more or less, the illusion of involvement. Some contact with the outside world. When the zones come together, writing a novel and preparing for a marathon, there are no birthdays, holidays, graduations, anniversaries, gatherings, visits.

You've discarded all the deposits that make up a life. Layer by layer. In exchange for something deeper beneath everything you've been looking for. For some special, different experience. Consciously taking the risk that beneath those layers, maybe there's nothing at all.

But, even that recognition of nothingness is better than a false brilliance.

The date of the Vienna City Marathon in front of you is like a colossus behind a hill you can see. Which you're walking towards, but you also dread. Which you worship, but you also curse. Which you don't see clearly, but you also swear by. Which you deny, but you also make sacrifices to.

It's all in your hands.

Pages written, kilometers run. They've taken it all out of you, that's the one thing they can't. And with it, you build something new. Big. The book, and the marathon.

In the bus on the way to Vienna you don't hear the rumbling of the motor and the passengers. Just the rushing of blood from short, violent injections at the thought of your goal. You smile, and then frown. You think about how great you are, and then scold yourself for that hubris. Others laugh, drink, make merry, some sing. You're there to do something greater. Something that will become clear on the track itself.

The first major marathon. And the first major book. The world itself has aligned like a monthly kilometer schedule. Organized like a well-prepared schedule ahead of the race. Had it really been that simple? Easy. All at once everything seems easy. Until you sit down and add up all the invested years of writing. Running. Then it all at once a weight drops. And a question: what kind of victory or prize could be worth all this? Is there such a prize at all?

You suppress questions with the spotlight. With those who will take your picture at tomorrow's interview about the book. With those who overlap at the bottleneck between the covered stands, at the finish line. You suppress it and the voices that bubble up from the past, close friends and family, how you've chosen the wrong path. It wasn't air soaked with sweat from the hot seats in your nostrils, but the smell of victory over all others. And you're on the way to Vienna.

You know well that's how it is. It's frightening to think of it, but that's how it is.

The two riskiest paths. The two greatest sacrifices. Leading to the two shortest pleasures.

And it all leads you to some kind of perdition.

How long does the satisfaction of publishing a book last? The whole day when it's finally in your hands, with the scent of new paper. The smell of a new life, which you'd like to save, but it leaks through your fingers. The very next day the comments will start on the path of its life that will have nothing to do with you. And nothing you do will be able to justify it. Every new page is a new beginning. It's hard and slow to climb, but so easy and fast to fall.

How long does the satisfaction of running a marathon last? The rest of the day from the moment you cross the finish line. The very next morning you're weaker. And everything is behind you, like someone else's dream they told you about. And you can't stop. Or slow down. Just ten days is enough to fall behind as if you'd ever even crossed the finish line. You'll pay dearly for every rest or break you take after that. Every written page you think is good could bury you afterwards.

Like a drunken millionaire, you spill it all for every little miserable moment of satisfaction on the trail. Everyday enjoyments, afternoon naps, moments with your wife or family, celebrations with friends... You give all you have and in that extravagance there is something alluring.

Everything was as it normally was. Sleepily disembarking from the bus in front of the hostel, the room overrun with people and clothes, the stench and the taste of nerves, stretching in the morning in the corridor, the last preparations, and then departing leisurely for the starting line. On foot for smaller marathons, less of a crowd, walking to the starting zone. But...

This time, right in front of the hostel, you descend into the underground station, into the hatch that rivers of people rushing to all possible openings flow from, and openings are everywhere, they're marked with colors, you can already spy a few runners diluted through the great mass, all pressing themselves into the mobile tubes, U-Bahn, U1 is this fateful line, the percentage of runners in it is the majority of the crowd, and after five stations the tube pours you out like unwanted feces on the platform, you know that's it though you have no idea where you are, because the ceiling is shuddering, somewhere up there in the light there is a boiling point that the pressure from the bottom is pushing towards, expelled towards the opening, and up...

Abundance. Of everything. Splashing. And not a clean breath permitted.

You should stay cool-headed. Maintain the visualization of the start and the race, the map you tried to memorize before falling asleep, keep your pulse from raging, find a spot on the clean street to warm up, but it doesn't work.

It's too much. Too many colors. Too many flags, signs, instructions, fences. Too many feet, trampling you. Mouths, puffing over your shoulder. Too many sources of sound. Loudspeakers, announcers, starting announcements, sponsors, jingles, calling, shouting. Too many smells. Burning, sweat, urine, the sour smell of isotonic drinks, hot asphalt, sunscreen, and some blossoming canopies nearby.

In new places, rooms, or office spaces, you never could relax until you'd studied every detail, mapped out every corner of the unfamiliar space. That's impossible now. This place would have to stop for a whole decade for you to take in all the colors, sounds, and smells.

You open your eyes.

You've run thousands of kilometers and prepared for years to experience the spectacle that you now don't have to pretend exists.

Somewhere in that mass is Pero Painter the Spartan.

Without any additional equipment or strategy, with his own knotty legs he stands on from yesterday to tomorrow, and even more, goes running, unwieldy and messy, among all those elite lazy lawyers who run to relieve stress, small business managers who run to advertise their firms, IT and computer specialists who run to unstick themselves from their chairs, rich commercial travelers and agents who run because they have to be in motion...

Somewhere in that mass, Pero Painter the Spartan stands, unwondering and unafraid, simply accepting the race like a painting task, like the opening of a bottle in the bus to Vienna, like the jokes he never finishes telling to the end, choking on his own laughter, like the life he lives between two jobs in the Split suburbs, because it's in the pure simple things that emotions are pure too, undisturbed, like a freshly opened can of paint...

You open your eyes. You're alone. Calm. But alone.

Alone, because your companions are gone, the crowd has separated you. Alone, because there is no crowd around you, you've reduced it to a decoration that doesn't touch you. Alone, because the race peels you down to what matters, to the core.

You try to encompass space. The street is wide, spacious, bound to the starting line with lines of blue toilet cabins on both sides. Behind them on the outside are crowds of walkers. And in front of them, an endless row of crowded heads hopping in place. The stream of the apex is separated in several places with tall red signs with the different groups written on them. According to your last results, you're in the second group, and you have yet to get through to get there.

The push is slow and tiring, the inexorable passing of minutes accelerated by the euphoric director of events whose voice is accompanied by deafening drums from the pillars of the loudspeaker. There's no water, the one supplement you've brought with you, and thirst is already sucking you dry. There's no toilet, it's far behind you, and exiting from this zone is no longer a physical possibility. There's no room to squat to stretch the tendons in your knees, let alone warm up and all that you needed to do earlier.

Your knees are cramping, it's hard to swallow sticky saliva, a barely perceptible line of urine slides down your leg. But you're in your zone. And you await the starting pistol.

The last ten, there's a roar with every counted-down second, the music has died down and it's finally the start of the race, and you've been there hours already, maybe for days, it seems like. And all the time that hasn't passed yet all at once falls onto your back with all its weight which you step into place under, hunched over from the invisible burden. And you don't look ahead, because maybe the pistol has already sounded, you don't know, the river all at once slowly starts to move, but the starting line your time is counted from is only five hundred meters ahead of you.

People from Kenya, Hungary, Asia, machines for swallowing kilometers, pass through the first group, until it is cleared, then the second group reaches the line, those five hundred meters are a completely separate marathon that a completely separate life is lived in. The barely audible beep that sounds after every step that passes over the rubber bump, even after yours, confuses the body. With confusion comes fatigue and heaviness, and all of it nearly knocks you to the ground, which you wouldn't even feel because the river of clustered shoulders would carry you forward, but then comes...

The Danube. The bridge. The reason why people come to the Vienna City Marathon.

Guided over a massive structure curved into an arch, enclosed by rows of pillars carrying white light bulbs, high above the vast and unmoving mass of water, with loudspeakers that Strauss' waltz rumbles from, somewhere at the top of that arch, drowned in the crowd, carried by the roar and the applause from the banks behind you, the buzzing of drones and the wind from the propeller of a helicopter with a camera over the river, you realize that this is the picture of a moment that, recorded by confused senses, you must store in your memory forever.

All at once the blood returns from your heavy legs to your body, you become lighter, your pulse drops, the sweat on your forehead dries, and your muscles warm up. Once again, it's all in your hands. And then, anything is possible. On the track and off of it.

There's a kind of success there. You don't take joy in it because only you know how much you paid for it. And expected it.

Does this lack of joy make you arrogant? Joy, again, makes you careless and meddlesome. The novel. The marathon. To rejoice or not? You're putting off the judgment.

Now you're just pleased to finally see a stirring from the dead end, some motion. Or you've started to see standing things differently. Or perhaps motion doesn't exist at all? Motion in relation to what? On Earth, which rests? But Earth moves in relation to the Sun, the Sun in relation to different stars, they in relation to the galaxy, our galaxy in relation to others...

You're putting off that arithmetic. One day. You'll add up all that motion. For now you avoid looking It in the eye. Or the friends you don't call from the last city, and in this one you won't make any. Or the family who is still waiting for your big news. One day, when you're all grown up, you'll call them all. It's clear now that that could be soon.

Till then, you'll hide so that you won't see the reflection of a defeated man in Its and their eyes.

And racing has taught you to take defeat hard, or not at all.

Running as a continuation will push your writing, the book will pull other things behind it, all that follows will be the beat of a butterfly's wing that will eventually cause an avalanche of chaos of opportunities in all other fields, and that life path, the greatest one, you'll finish with recognition and relief. It's the one calculation you see no room for strangers in.

Waiting for a better tomorrow, you're certain of one change. The one in the body.

Everyday workouts resembling rituals of self-flagellation, alienating you from your surroundings, alienated you from your own body. So much so that you're free to conclude that this man who, it seems, will win, is not you.

His legs have become hard and knotted, perpetually inflamed, thinned calves, and unusually raised and protruding thighs. His feet have become flat. The lower part of his abdomen over his genitals has caved in and veins leap over it. His chest filled with the morning mistrals is stretched and it's hard to guess the angle of your back you'll carry it with. Your hands have dried out, your face is has become longer. Everything is actually a tangle of elongated parts of tendons tied here and there in knots. You're awkward with this body because you need a lot of time to become related to it.

But it's not just the body. The way it functions has changed, too. You're faster, more alive. Tightened tendons have tightened your synapses, too, which your impulses travel faster on. You wonder at the quickness of your reactions. You see everything quickly and that isn't something to always be glad about. You're always on the edge. Of the ring. Concrete, sharp, efficient. You suffer less from procrastination, over thinking, equivocation, and slowness. And, since you're like this, others cannot stand you. You're awkward with this new character because there are fewer and fewer people who can follow you, and more and more who go around you.

Until you become related to it, you cheer for that other man, like you would for a close relative, to win. Besides that, you've put everything you have on him. And you snicker, because victory snickers at you.

Self-confidence is a drug your body is not used to. It trembles from the fix because it's an injected feeling that's completely confused your receptors.

Under the effects of that feeling you grasp the Vienna trail unconscious of the crowd around you. A stable rhythm, the whole long route, all forty-two kilometers. Your body is a machine attuned to the right frequency. Because you've been tweaking it for months. This is the moment to cash in every investment, every deposited instant. Maybe it'll be the same with the novel. And everything else.

Alongside four or five wicked ones (stony, dry faces, without a trace of cramps or a drop of sweat) you got hold of your rhythm. Everything timed evenly, with steps of even length. An even stride and landing on the heel, in the arch of the foot. Your step sank in with them, you don't notice it at all. Before you would go with inertia holding the same rhythm, now you go in a vacuum without sound or a trace of resistance.

Passing a sign with the number 27 inscribed on it, you entered a critical phase five kilometers long, where there are the most dropouts and falls. You ran through it lightly, looking into the distance, to the goal which has never seemed so easy to conquer. And that's the only thing you saw.

Somewhere out of the corner of your eye, on the other edge of the trail, through the sparse forest of your companions, your brothers in rhythm, a vision with illogical movements came to you. Torn, spasmodic, they deviated from the coordinated movements of the group. Until it collapsed. It looks subdued before the sun that strikes its forehead, you only saw spasming hands, grasping at the chest and curls during the fall...

Funny. Pero Painter has curls just like that, you thought. And you laughed. Because Pero Painter is a Spartan. And Spartans don't fall. Falling is for pussies. The kind of people who've never shed a drop of sweat for anything in their lives, who for any bit of effort always find a way to make it easy for themselves and toss it all away, who are used to getting everything for less than the real cost of living.

Not Pero Painter, who has always paid triple for everything he has.

That thought threw you from your rhythm. When your step deviated from theirs in your own pace, it made replicating it shorter and harder. Fatigue all of a sudden fell onto your back, your pulse started to rise. It's incomprehensible that you would react to this with acceleration. But you are. And then once again you get back into step with the wicked ones. And you feel relief.

Brko is a politician. The back that some Party branch rests on. On the county level, he's smart enough to hold it down, he's a god and a cudgel. There were all kinds of people in the bus to Vienna, but you didn't see a politician in it, or in any other bus heading to the marathon. Although that's not where his specialty lies.

Brko applied his gift to find a solution in anything, more or less legal, but certainly favorable to himself, to marathons, too. Vienna, Munich, Budapest, Skopje, Belgrade, Ljubljana, Rome, Amsterdam, Geneva... No matter where he ran or which trail or the accompanying insurance, Brko would find a way to shorten it. It was his rule that everything could be shorter, faster, and a less demanding solution for everything.

You already know the pattern. He'll be in the last starting zone, on the threshold of his fifties, with those like him, warm himself up, seriously preparing, manifesting in himself the statements for the local media on his return, waiting for the starting pistol, heading

towards the starting line and—disappear. Not one of the fifty runners from the bus will see him at any stage on the trail. Except at the finish line.

Naturally, Brko will not be on the list runners who finished the marathon, nowhere in evidence, nor will his result be recorded, because he did not pass the necessary checkpoints with the chip beneath his shirt. But he'll be at the finish line, and on the Vienna red carpet, he'll pass over the big clock between the gasping stands, come into the finish zone, get his medal, and then will still find a way to go back through the crowd and behind the backs of the volunteers grab another medal for one of his higher-ranked Party colleagues, probably convincing him that it was the only one he had.

And a good part of the marathon race, where you live your whole life, and have thoughts you didn't even know existed in you, you'll ask yourself what the hell Brko is doing and what the point of it is.

There's nothing there, when you take away the wonder, nothing except for the laughable need for the rush and the crowd before the race, pointless preparations for something you can no longer achieve, silly habits that have turned into an addiction to roaring and cheering, a desperate need to take part in the spectacle and for a moment feel a piece of life trickling through your fingers.

And then you realize that Brko is a mirror into the future. All of a sudden, you see your future self in him.

The roar at the finish line at the Vienna City Marathon, the roar that drowns out the music and the hysterical blathering of the speakers, is a sound that could raise the dead. The whole kilometer ahead of it, spectators are crowded along the track, interestedly awaiting the living dead one by one. Looking them in their deadened faces, the fossilized, lifeless eyes. They're everywhere, just not in that body. But there's one spark left in them, enough on the wave of that roar to push the husk of that body to the finish line. There, after passing it, they'll fall somewhere along the edge of the plateau, slowly return to life, but the audience isn't interested in that part.

Five hundred meters from the finish line, the stands are raised. The audience doesn't just seem to be heads protruding one from the other along a makeshift fence, but a row of faces lost in the haze. Only hours or days later will you feel the elation, when in the enlarged photographs you'll read the enthusiasm on your face and try to impart at least a bit of it to yourself. Posthumously. And you'll realize how you're slowly sweating and how your muscles contract and relax.

Then, in the gap between the raised stands, there's nothing of that, besides the unclear waves of undefined energy that flows like massive windows left open at two ends of a corridor. A draft. You'd hold on tight to something, but you no longer have any contact with a single part of your body. Numb all over. Just with the ground, but you can't feel that with your wooden feet, either.

That's how it is, you see out of the corner of your eye, you don't dare to look down, because the two hundred fifty meters ahead of the finish line the track is covered with red carpet. With steps soft as cotton, as you slowly raise your gaze and you see your all-time record, in clear, neon green numbers on a huge display, 3 hours and 10 minutes and 35 seconds, someone puts that god into your palm, and with it you cross the finish line, you fall to worship him, gurgling and choking, simultaneous ejecting and trying to inject some of the freshness of calm breath into yourself.

The volunteers with the medals grab you too late, you're already on the ground. While you're in a lying position, they lay a white ribbon with a heavy piece of metal on you, their heads tilted back, you see a large building.

The Burgtheater.

You've played out one of your bigger roles tonight. But the curtains have already been drawn. It's over before you've even registered the applause. Thank you and goodbye.

The return trip is usually just a few hours after the marathon. This time, the departure from the Vienna hostel had been delayed by ten hours. So there was time to wait to see who would find Pero Painter.

Because Pero Painter fell.

Heavy and slow as a colossus, he lost consciousness and fell from exhaustion among the people on the track. He fell at their feet. Humbly, as if it were a shrine.

If you hadn't seen it with your own eyes, you wouldn't have believed it. Spartans don't fall.

But, that image out of the corner of your eye while you were running, that had been Pero Painter. If you hadn't been so smug, you could have been with him. If it had been up to you, that smugness could have cost someone their life. But just like that, Brko was there.

He was the only one to testify that Pero Painter had fallen, right where Brko had come out to shorten his path. He was taken away by paramedics before he could ask them anything. It was a relief to have at least that information, that the paramedics were looking after the missing Pero. But in which one of the many hospitals in such a big city?

Luck, who had never followed Pero Painter, accompanied him to a Vienna hospital, where he moaned disoriented, not realizing where he was, why he was there, who these people were around him and what he had done before being there. Luck that there was a nurse from Novi Sad, who recognized his shirt with a picture of Marjana and Saint Duje, as well as the accent, and with two calls to the organizers he got through to the number of the hostel, and then to the number of Kika.

In a marathon, and in everything about it, there are people and non-people. There is no nation, faith, or race. The nurse was just—a brother.

Only when they administered an infusion to the filled-up Pero Painter late that evening did they head back. And only then, onto his exhausted body, like a vulture on a mutilated mess, did the thought descend on him.

Luck.

Spartans without luck are just ordinary Lilliputians.

In this race, too, without anything extra. With the novel, too, without any defense or clique. You had a little luck. You happened to come across a crumb from a rich table.

Luck is necessary.

It's not a relief to know that. Because, besides, you know that she isn't usually inclined your way.