

# VIRTUOSO

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When I dream it's of you

My love, my friend

When I sing it's for you

My love, my friend

(Marie Laforêt, "Mon amour, mon ami")

. . . and huge stars,

above the feverish head, and hands,

reaching out to the one,

who hasn't for ages existed – and won't exist –

who cannot exist – and must exist.

(Marina Tsvetaeva, "Nights without the beloved . . .")

# PART ONE

# Soliloquy

Face down on the hotel linen, the body. Just one hand drooping off the side of the bed, resting on the bristles of the rose-coloured carpet, fingers spread, glossy nails, raw cuticles, wedding ring in white gold like an eye frozen mid-wink.

The rest of her is emptied flesh, breasts smothered into the bed-sheet, pillows crushed against the headboard. Her contorted shoulders a grimace, the back of the knee a gasp, skin already dimming.

This woman is alone.

\*

Her wife has set the bag of lemons down on the coffee table of the hotel suite. She is approaching the closed bedroom door. Hand on the knob, turning. The metal spring jumps and the door is sliding over the flush carpet fibres.

\*

When her wife sees the body – how alone it is – she pounces on top of it.

\*

Outside, the whirling sound of the ambulance. Closer and closer to the hotel. In the bedroom, on the nightstand, the phone hangs off its tight-curl cord, beeping hysterics. The wife is scavenging the body for breath, hair in her mouth, she's pulling it out. She's dragging the body down, thump. Millions of rose-coloured bristles. Her hands clam at the sternum. The phone is beeping and she's thumping the ribcage, and rubber-soled footsteps are nearing. The hotel clerk is young and lean, he steps forward then back, then forward then back, he wants to look, he doesn't want to look. A heavier pacing behind him, the manager is here now, he says, "*Volte agora para baixo*" to the kid, Go downstairs now. As the kid is fumbling away, a man and a woman in forest green medical uniforms brush past him. "Go!", the manager repeats. The kid is going but he keeps looking back. The wife is screaming now: "*Por favor!* She's going to die!"

The defibrillator is unpacked. The man in uniform has a patch on his breast pocket, a medical emblem with a thin red snake. The woman in uniform, same patch, nudges the thumping wife, pulls her aside, pulls her aside again. "I don't speak Portuguese! We're on holiday!" The woman in uniform is touching her shoulder and making eye contact. The wife is yelling in French like chewing, and the woman in uniform is holding her back and nodding. The wife is sloshing her blonde hair away from her eyes, trying to gawk back towards the body. Her tongue is fidgeting with words, she's thinking, *I just want to touch her*, as if touching the body were all it would take. The woman in uniform is pulling her into the adjacent room. "I understand," the woman in uniform is repeating in her nasally English, "I understand, Madame . . ."

"Clear," the man in uniform pronounces in Portuguese and sends the body a shock, its chest curves up, the wife jumps towards the woman in uniform, the woman in uniform catches the wife, something like a hug, the body falls back down to the carpet. The wife's tears split like hairs. "Clear," the man pronounces again, the woman in uniform is squeezing the wife's forearms. The wife shuts herself

up with her own gasp and peers. The current races through the flesh to the heart and pulls the body up, chest bowing, ribs splintering beneath her skin, and for a moment, the wife thinks she's getting up this time. But the body cinches in and collapses, thump, back down into the millions of rose-coloured bristles. Her shoulder blades hit the floor and spread, and the head winces then stops. The mouth inert. From her slack, parted lips, a viscous blue foam is seeping out.

\*

Later, the sun has set. The wife fills out the forms, empty stare, stiff wrist, runny nose. The body's name and age and social security number. Her own name she writes haltingly, having to look away and then back down at the paper several times. When her pen finishes the last letter, she picks up the paper and stares at her full name: *Aimée de Saint-Pé*.

It is then that she feels an extra presence in the room. Something like a colour where there was no colour. She looks around her: the doctor's a brunette in starched white, sitting in her chair; behind her, light-grey window panes; below, a floor of pale freckled tiles. And yet, there is an extra weight within the room, like a movement finishing itself.

The nurse puts a hand on Aimée's shoulder. "Are you alright, Madame? Do you need another glass of water maybe?" Aimée looks up at the nurse. Her lips are oily in the crevices, her skin is darker after sunset, and her eyes – Aimée's stare is gliding past the nurse, behind her head, towards the wall of the office. Something is there.

The nurse is waiting. "Do you need . . . ?" she starts again, but then lets the phrase go. It is behind her, yes. The weight, the movement, the colour.

The doctor looks up and then back down at the paperwork. The nurse is speaking to Aimée again. But it – it is untucking itself from the air, groping its way along, moving towards her like flesh.

A click pinches metal and Aimée's chair fills with a wet heat. The doctor has stapled the forms, and urine drips onto the floor.

## A little to the left, mon amour

It was an ambling humidity, as August exhaled and the ocean knocked itself against the coasts, beating out the fever. In Paris, the cars shuffled back with their passengers after the holidays, and the mugginess hovered at the tops of cars and the chests of pedestrians and the ground-floor windows.

\*

*I knew your friend, the Malá Narcis*, was how Mr Doubek's email began.

\*

Jana's armpits were once again damp, despite the deodorant she had reapplied in the train-station toilets. She was just coming back to Paris from her solo holiday to the South.

She had had the idea to go to Marseille in the first place when she was translating a brochure for import/export petroleum, which mentioned the city was France's major centre of oil refining, having extensive access to the French waterways up into the Rhône through the canal. She looked at the train prices and found them reasonable.

In Marseille, she took the ferry to the island of If and visited the



dungeon from Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*; she ate sword-fish with ratatouille and saffron rice; she looked at the Opéra de Marseille from the outside and saw that nothing was on; she sniffed the various local soaps; she eyed the flopped fish on the blue tarp with crushed ice at the fish market on the Quai des Belges at the end of the harbour; and then she went to the beach, took a seat in the shade and tried to imagine how someone like Antonin Artaud, the misfit avant-garde theatre artist and Marseille native, could have grown up here. She pictured him with far-flung eyes, pacing around his home city, philosophically infuriated. As she watched the blot of his silhouette jerk along the sand, she realised it wasn't him at all that she was envisioning, but a girl she used to know back in Prague, who everyone called the Malá Narcis, the Little Narcissus.

That evening, Jana meandered towards the city centre and the so-called lesbian bars she had spotted, went into one, sipped on a gin and tonic at the bar, and then walked back to the hotel. Five nights of it was enough, she didn't need seven, so she went to the train station and changed her ticket.

Back in Paris, in her studio apartment on the dead-end street stemming from Place Monge, just above the shop that only sells toolboxes in various assortments, on the sixth floor, she plugged in her phone and opened up her laptop and saw the strange email from a "Mr Roman Doubek". He explained that he had requested her services from her agency for his upcoming trip to the Paris Medical Trade Show where he would be representing Linet, the famous Czech hospital-bed supplier, but her agency had told him that she was unavailable during his requested dates. They must have hired their other Czech interpreter in her absence, Jana thought, the young, orb-eyed Alicia, who started as a discreet and thankful foreigner with visible panty lines, but had recently spurted into a self-assured, cat-eyed, thong-wearing young woman in part because of her new French boyfriend and how well things were going with him, and how far away the Czech Republic now felt,

and how naïve she had been, and how glad she was to no longer be naïve like that.

Jana read the email and thought of Alicia, her taut breasts in her cheap, ecstatically patterned blouses, her stare somewhere between expectant, shy and vengeful. The way she began to ask Jana if she was seeing anyone and footnoted their exchanges with anecdotes about her boyfriend and his funny French buddies. Once she wouldn't let it go, insisting on confiding to Jana that she found her to be isolated, and it might do her good to open up a bit, because she was actually an attractive woman at the end of the day, and she could, if she wanted to, go out with her and her boyfriend and his funny French buddies, and who knows. Jana folded the feelings into one straight line, which drew itself on her lips.

\*

*I knew your friend, the Malá Narcis*, the first line read.

\*

The next day, Jana got a pressing call from her agency coordinator who was thrilled to find her back in Paris early. They needed an urgent substitute for Alicia, who was supposed to have come back a couple of days ago from her holiday in Biarritz, but, while climbing some rocks at the beach to take a sunset photo in her new bikini, as her French boyfriend coaxed "A little to the left, *mon amour*", and his buddies and their girls drank beers, the Czech girl felt the sun setting on her back, watched the waves rolling towards her and felt that she had finally found her place in their world, when the rock tilted and she slipped and her ankle cracked.

Jana agreed with the agency coordinator that she would take over Mr Doubek tomorrow morning.

\*

Jana put on one of her professional suits – a knee-length skirt and

matching blazer in midnight blue, with a simple cream-coloured v-neck blouse and dark-blue heels.

She arrived early at the medical trade show at the Paris Expo in Porte de Versailles, held in the largest pavilion of the seven-halled convention centre, an enormous metal-beamed structure with lofting skylights over its grid-work of stands. She walked along the alleyways between the stands, familiarising herself with the layout. She passed the Bs and Cs, checking her map so as not to miss the right turn at J14 towards the International Meetings Lounge, where she was to greet Mr Doubek and his French clients at 10am.

The booths were already filled with people chattering in many languages, setting up their boards and medical apparatus. She passed by D32, where a wheelchair was on display, the cushion a tan and beige ying-yang design, the back of the seat lined with soft-ridged panelling. Behind the wheelchair, a banner listed the product's assets: *bedsore prevention cushions, a remote-controlled electric rise to stand-up position . . .* Jana glanced at the right-hand armrest, a slide-out remote control with a rubber blue grip sticking out.

She walked on, then slowed at H40, gazing at a poster of a plump heart, veined with blue arrows in various directions. Two compact chest defibrillators were being taken out of their case and put on display on the foldout table.

\*

"*Excusez-moi*" – the voice came from behind her. Then a hand touched her shoulder. Jana turned sharply, almost nicking the woman with her elbow.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" said the woman, stepping back and Jana pulled her hands to her gut.

The woman was also wearing a skirt suit, but hers looked completely different. The skirt a bit shorter and a little tighter, the colour a little darker – a midnight between blue and black. The blazer cinched at her waist, with just a hint of an ivory blouse peering from

between the crevice. She had a black silk scarf around her neck, but her collarbone was bare. Jana looked down at her feet: similar heels, but with a pointed toe.

“I didn’t mean to startle—” the woman said nervously.

Her blonde hair was parted neatly in the middle and sleeked back into a tight ponytail that hung between her shoulder blades. Her cheekbones opened up on her face, making her eyes look thin, drawn back, mooning with a private embarrassment.

“Do I know you?” Jana asked flatly.

“Oh . . . Oh!” the woman was putting her hand up to her mouth. “I’m sorry, I thought you worked here,” she said through her fingers.

The woman’s eyes floated down to Jana’s badge on her lapel, she pronounced the letters in red out loud “Liné . . . ?”

“Linet,” Jana corrected her pronunciation. “Czech manufacturer. The top hospital-bed supplier worldwide. I do work here. I’m an interpreter.”

“Oh . . .” the woman continued uneasily, “well, maybe you can’t help me then, but I’m looking for the Dupont Medical Booth. Well actually, between them and a group with the oxygen generators. I’ve already made two circles through the pavilion, but . . . I can’t find it.”

“You’re in the internationals section,” Jana said.

“I am?” the woman replied.

Jana began unfolding her map. The woman quickly pulled out hers and showed it to Jana.

“I got one of those too, but I swear it’s as if the spot I’m looking for doesn’t exist!”

The two women put their maps side by side as if they could complete each other’s scope and traced their eyes up and down the grid of numbered letters.

“The doctor that’s speaking at the Global Plastics round table,” the woman began speaking aimlessly as she searched, “that’s my father. He’s a prosthetics specialist.”

“You work with your father?” Jana asked.

“I mean I used to be his assistant, like a welcome desk secretary to be honest, but that was years back. No, now I work for a friend of his actually, a gynaecologist, his clinic is right next to the Portuguese Embassy, above Parc Monceau, on the—”

“N39,” Jana pointed to a small square in the south-east corner of the hall.

“That’s funny,” the woman said. “I walked around N36, N37 over and over again and didn’t see it . . .”

The two women parted their maps and folded them into their respective blazer pockets.

“Do you think you could help me with one more thing?” the woman said shyly, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a badge with a safety pin glued onto the back. She extended the badge towards Jana.

Jana took the badge in her hand and turned it over. She undid the safety pin and looked up.

“Where shall I pin it?”

The woman took out one finger, the nail painted in a creamy rose and pointed to her lapel.

“Here. Thank you.”

Jana leaned in towards the woman’s bare collarbone, pinched a bit of the coarse dark fabric and drew the needle point through, clipped it and then let go, careful not to touch the woman’s chest.

She stepped back and looked at the badge fixed on the woman’s lapel.

“*Aimée DE SAINT-PÉ*,” the badge spelled out.

“*Merci*,” the woman said.

Just then, Jana had the idea to introduce herself, but the woman gave her a brisk smile, turned and began walking towards N39.

Jana watched the woman walk away, her skirt shifting at the curve of her buttocks, then pulling over the slope towards her thighs.

# Jana

For the first nineteen years of my life, I was a simple Czech girl, a watercolour.

Those days were a clock run by the workers and the ŠtB, the Czechoslovakian State Security. Workers, dressed in stained beige, loading a truck with big square canvas bags. Workers, wearing buttoned-up shirts, walking to work. Workers, carrying their briefcases with stiff arms. The ŠtB, walking in their plainclothes, snapping hidden photos. Man on steps. Woman with buggy. Man and woman hand in hand. Famous artworks of our era. They tapped telephones, opened letters with their steam apparatus, crawled through the veins of the city and pulled people out, out of their own biographies. People disappeared, reappeared, confessed, reported others . . . Much fervent artwork was created, in the preferred medium of photography: *Man Subverting Republic* (Black and White), *Woman Distributing* (Tryptic), *Man and Woman Organising* (Reprint).

These events closed over like wounds made of water. Life continued. Bubbles of breath rose to the surface and popped. The streets filled up with the absent minded, people walking heavy in their head, burying one worry with another. Anthills and craters. Warm steam from boiling potatoes seeped out of an open window. Pigeons

pecked at the bland earth. The ration queues for sugar, coffee, salt, bread . . . Shadows pinched together in the alleyways, then quickly separated. There were kisses. There were pamphlets. There were foreign bills slipped from one pocket to another. At the corner, a woman crossed the street. On the walkway, a kid fell off his bike. Code or meaningless events? The cat in the window stretched her jaw wide open, as if she were a tiger.

\*

I was just a particle, a frequency, a rainbow in the sky, a melody on the tip of someone's consciousness in January 1969, thirteen years before my birth, when, in Prague's Wenceslas Square, Czech student Jan Palach set himself on fire to protest the continued Soviet domination of Czechoslovakia.

And I was still that immaterial soundless refrain when, a month later, another Czech student, Jan Zajíc, travelled to Prague to the same square for the 21st anniversary of the Communist takeover, on 25 February 1969. He was a nobody kid from Šumperk, where he was attending a technical college, specialising in railroads, and also writing poetry. An hour or so after noon, he walked into the passageway of No. 39 on that square, his white shirt completely soaked. He lit a match and drew it to his chest. His shirt burst into a fur of flames and the body within twitched against itself.

He had planned to run out of the door into the square, the square where Jan Palach burned like a torch. But fully aflame, his body of nineteen years only made it into the hallway, where he collapsed.

\*

"Why did they do it?" I remember asking my mother.

"Do what?"

\*

Let's just say I know those boys set themselves on fire, not

because someone told me, but because floating particles talk among themselves.

In fact, we were very chatty when, a couple of years after Palach's protest, the ŠtB tried to destroy any trace of his actions and existence. They exhumed his body after the burial and cremated it. His mother grieved erratically. It's terrible to mourn a son one never had.

\*

Then, all of a sudden, I had to leave the chatty circle of particles and be born – and of all places, in Prague – and of all days, on the 1st of January – and of all names, Jana.

“Why did they do it? Didn't it hurt a lot? Especially on your face. On your cheeks and on your eyelashes . . .”

My mother looked up from the sink, over at me.

\*

I thought often about this act, so unusual, so special. I kept trying to decide if it's something I would like to do, or would like to reserve for a very special occasion.

Once I was bored, I mean *so bored* I felt like the air inside of me was cracking, so I pleaded with my brother to play with me. He was older and uninterested in my games. Usually, I accepted his rebuff, trudged away and ran traces into the carpet with my fingernails. But this time, my boredom was so immense and unending, the boredom of rooms and rooms of bed-ridden children, eyeing springtime through the window. I told my brother that if he didn't play with me, I'd set myself on fire. I turned to leave, he grabbed my wrist and pulled me towards him into what I remember as my first hug.

\*

I gave up on playtime and resigned myself to endless hours with my face pressed against the window, watching people in the streets below come and go. I felt like I could read their thoughts.



I followed a woman with my eyes, in her listless walk, carrying a bag, her mind twisting. *I should have said – no, just keep quiet, that's it, silence will show him – remember to save a garlic clove – but who does he think he is, professor's son – that chicken smelled bad this morning – it's about getting a little respect – I hope it didn't go bad – now that she's eating chicken – I'll take her to the park this Saturday – That son of a bitch and his Goddamn face – Why does my leg itch? – If it comes, it comes. I refuse to be afraid to die.*

\*

Paranoia was our speciality. Right before that final autumn of 1989, I remember my uncle telling my father that he shouldn't sit on the toilet without looking first into the bowl.

\*

The Communist regime in Czechoslovakia made everyone pragmatic and self-serving. To an alien eye, ironically, we might have looked like a capitalist mental asylum, obsessed to the bone of each day about getting more or less than someone else, and why, and why not, and how – tomorrow, next time – not to let him, not to let her, get more, get mine, get me.

The young mothers took to the park for information. They'd take a seat on a bench, send their little ones to fumble around together as the gossip began. The park bench was the only safe place to talk, one eye on your child, and the other on the mamkas. They spelled out the necessary information, encoded seamlessly in their chit-chat. *Her mother's dying* meant the apartment was up for grabs, a two-bedroom like that, and right on Janáčkovo nábřeží, third floor, windows facing the river, I'll pay her a visit, poor woman – “Lenka don't put your face on that, that's filthy!” Your Lenka's gotta stop touching everything. You know what's-her-name's little girl just kept sucking on nails she picked up from the ground. Then she got tetanus and died. Her mouth just rotted away. I know, I know, I'm always telling Lenka if she

puts her face and fingers in everything, she'll get tetanus and die . . . but you know kids, they're stubborn. *By the way, does Ljdie still come by* meant what kind of Western products does she have. *And Karel is cheating on her with the Director of the mathematics department* meant your son better make friends with his. "LENKA I SAID GET YOUR FINGERS OUT OF YOUR MOUTH UNLESS YOU WANT IT TO ROT AWAY LIKE WHAT'S-HER-NAME! . . . Poor girl. She sure was pretty before her mouth fell off."

\*

I was a clean-handed little girl. I was not curious about things that could leave a stain. I did not touch dirt. I did not touch puddles. I never plunged a finger secretly into a pot of jam. Although I followed, in my quiet vigour, the initiative of those children, the ones who got onto their stomachs at the kerb and shoved their full hand into the gutter, then pulled it out and ran around, chasing the others, all of us shrieking out of the fear and delight we could not voice at home. At home, we had to keep quiet. Your grandma's sick, keep quiet. Your mother's got a migraine, keep quiet. The neighbours'll complain we've got a spoiled child, keep quiet.

Of course, we – the quiet children of the neighbourhood – were bottled up with the desire to shriek. We would have welcomed any occasion. We would have chirped in ultimate joy at the sight of someone being stabbed in the street, wishing our hearts into a knot that this stabber would pull out his meaty blade and run with it at us, so we could shriek even louder! We were so desperate for every giggle.

\*

My brother in his loose blue T-shirt kneeled down by my side. He took the two shoelaces out of my hands and pulled them up like magic ropes and twisted them around each other. Then in one swift gesture, he released his hands and I marvelled at the perfect bunny-eared bow on my shoe.