

as though she were a character in a science fiction movie. We stood in front of the Nevsky metro station, a crowded intersection, and she gave me her email address in blue on lined paper, like a bit of jazz melody. I put it in my pocket. She left. Pretty soon, four guys jostled me from different directions. I felt something in my pocket and pushed a guy's hand away. I stood at the curb and checked for my wallet. It was gone. I ran to the hotel and cancelled all the credit cards. Just as I was done with that, two elegant strangers, a man and a woman, who looked like an ad for cognac, appeared. "Are you Josip Novakovich?"

"How would you know that?" I said, in Russian.

"We picked up your wallet from the pavement. We saw you standing on the curb and feeling your pockets. But as you reached down, you knocked out your wallet, which was sticking halfway out. So here it is."

"How did you know where I was staying?" I asked, a bit suspicious.

"A copy of your visa was in the wallet. Well, here it is, stating the address, Pushkinskaya 6."

"Why didn't you let me know right away?"

"We couldn't as we were driving a car, and by the time we parked and got out, you were gone."

I had fifty dollars in the wallet. "I'd like to give you at least the fifty dollars."

"We don't want it. We are happy with the good karma. Maybe someone will help us like this one day." They smiled and left and I looked after them, admiring how nicely they moved, like athletes. And I thought, Did I accidentally pull the wallet partly out from my tight pocket when I put Marina's email address into the pocket? Did those four guys try to pickpocket me? Maybe yes to all the questions? I guess I'll never know the answer, and I won't know who these two good people were who showed up, whether ballet dancers, investment bankers, or the police.

But about Marina I know. We exchanged a few emails. Then last year, at least ten years after, I thought, who do I know in Saint Petersburg? I thought of getting in touch with the people I knew and sort of knew as I was tempted to take a trip to Russia while staying in Bulgaria for a few months. The flights were cheap. I could be there for US\$150 round-trip. In Sofia, I was tempted to get a Russian visa. I lived around the corner from a huge Russian center. I wrote to several people. One of them wrote, "I won't be

there. You've probably read about that metro explosion at Senaya Ploshad? I was in the train just ahead of that one, two minutes away. It could have been me dead. I am leaving the city." Anyway, then I wrote to Marina, and she said, "Yes, wonderful, let's meet up when you visit."

"How has life been this last decade for you?" I wrote.

"Up and down. I am spending too much money on doctors and medications. I will tell you in person. Just come and visit."

We corresponded back and forth. She was curious about Bulgaria and Croatia but said it was too complicated to get a travel visa and time off her work. Two months after our flurry of correspondence, I checked her Facebook page. There were all kinds of wishes for a better life.

Her picture is still there—she is sitting in a steeple of a tall church, her elbows on the ledge, looking out with a sensation of longing, perhaps longing for flight.

I gathered from talking to mutual acquaintances that she had jumped out of her apartment window from the ninth floor. Marina had suffered from depression. She took medicine to keep her balance. It was hard for her to keep her balance in a window—the downward pull got her. Well, I must say, I don't know much about her. She has remained a stranger. Her death made her for a few days a close friend whom I grieved. But I never knew her, only the tragic outline of her biography. She was in her midthirties, living alone. Maybe she'd never been able to get along with anybody despite being intelligent and well-read, and she obviously couldn't get along with herself. Maybe she had a terminal illness and wasn't depressed but couldn't face the prospect of a long decline and pain. I wish I had had a chance to talk with her. I had the chance I didn't take. Next time, if I meet a fascinating stranger, I will at least make sure I drink some powerful tea with her.

JOSIP NOVAKOVICH

Anatomy Professor

Dr. Radomir Davidović six foot six, thick black eyebrows, deep voice, lectured on human anatomy in Novi Sad from 1975 to 1976, and he terrified his audience. It's all right if you miss a lesson in grammar, but if you are going to be a surgeon, it's not all right to miss a nerve. As a practicing neurosurgeon in Zemun (Belgrade), he offered clinical examples, strokes, spinal cord injuries, to show where neural pathways led. The year before ours, he had failed 50 percent of the students—better that some people not become doctors than that some people die from malpractice.

Since I was from Croatia, my Serbian roommate claimed I had no chance, that as soon as Professor Davidović heard my Croatian, he would flunk me. A Croatian student from Osijek passed out as soon as she walked into the auditorium for the final exam conducted by Davidović. I have no idea whether she's a doctor now. That happened right before my exam. I was taken aback, and I gave my answers hesitantly and asked for time-outs to sketch on a piece of paper various neural pathways, and then I answered. Dr. Davidović said, "I like your method. Anatomy is spatial and visual."

He asked me a question, which he prefaced as his own anatomy professor's question in his final exam, and I thought it was an encouraging nudge. I took time to answer. He said, "Come here, I give you a big hug. Next year, be my teaching assistant, and we'll get you a good stipend. Promise you will be a doctor."

I wondered why he said that as though he knew I was dropping out.

I emigrated to the United States. I visited Novi Sad once, got in touch with my old roommates, found out who had dropped out, and found out that Dr. Davidović no longer taught. I talked to Nikola, a fellow student, who had proposed to me to assassinate Tito together; his house was on a curved slope, a ninety-degree angle to the street, and we knew Tito's parade would pass by right there. We rehearsed, poking rifles beneath the tiles of his red roof. Nikola said, "If we both take shots at him at the same time as they slow down, we are bound to get him."

"Yes, and the cops will shoot us. We'll each get one hundred bullets."

"We will die famous. Who knows famous surgeons? But famous assassins, everybody! Brutus, Princip, come on!"

We ended up standing on the curb awaiting Tito during an anatomy lecture; Dr. Davidović had insisted that we stand and wave to the president, who passed by motionless, so it was not clear to me that he was not a wax figure. In the slanted ice-rain, lightly clad, we all shivered and cursed for two fucking hours. And I got bronchitis.

Anyway, four years later, I found my Index, the student booklet, and my A slanted in blue ink next to *Anatomy*, signed Dr. Radomir Davidović. Out of 140 students, 3 got As.

I googled him, and only one picture of him showed up, probably taken ten years after I had seen him last. All sorts of IDs from Republika Srpska, where Davidović worked as a senator until his death in 2006, came up. He served as ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Australia from 2001 to 2002. He officially resigned because of anti-Serb policies in Bosnia. I don't know why he actually resigned and how he got that plum job to begin with.

He died. I had thought I eventually would see him and he'd have fascinating things to say. He looked like God by Michelangelo sans beard.

So how could this admirable man be part of a regime that committed atrocities? His brother published a letter on the internet by Dr. Davidović which has since disappeared, claiming that he, Radomir, had followed the Hippocratic oath and in fact treated more Muslims than Orthodox. He had founded a hospital in a marginal zone, in Milici near the Drina River. He had thought he would be treating Serbian soldiers. Instead, he mostly treated Muslim victims of Serbian soldiers.

Dr. Davidović published another letter in which he questioned whether the Srebrenica massacre of eight thousand men and boys had happened on the scale the Western media claimed. He had read reports in foreign newspapers that Serbs had killed five hundred thousand Albanians in Kosovo, a statistically provable falsehood. What's to guarantee, he said, that there were mass executions in Bosnia on the scale the foreign press claims? He denied the existence of Serb concentration camps. He claimed a lot of it was misrepresentation and fake news.

He died of leukemia, which he attributed to the depleted uranium bombing by NATO. How can one be certain of such causes? I just saw a movie, which Croatian director Mimi Kezele made in Germany, about Kosovo Albanians

and Serbs in conflict in which a child dies of leukemia from depleted uranium radiation. How many deaths could be attributed to that radiation? Well, causes of leukemia are multiple, so the real number will never be known. Dr. Davidović died at seventy-two. I can also add as a sidebar, but it should be a big story, that my niece in Zagreb got leukemia from being exposed to radiology department rays without a lead wall to protect her department. Five out of seven of the doctors working on her ward got chronic leukemia. Dr. Davidović addressed the right issue. A powerful man like that was actually a victim of freaky radiation.

I suspect that even if I had had a chance to talk to him before his death, I would remain puzzled. I could write a piece of fiction to imagine the thinking and the experience that made this rather complex individual. I think it's an interesting quandary that he has faced me with—which is worse, to talk good and do nothing, or to talk bad and to save hundreds of lives? To use Marxist principles, Communism failed in practice: beautiful talk didn't result in good economy and freedom for the people. It can be also the reverse: incorrect ideology and ugly talk could be refuted by good deeds.

Dr. Davidović talked badly and saved hundreds of Muslims. What have we done in the meanwhile?

Josip Novakovich emigrated from Croatia to the United States at the age of twenty. He has published a dozen books, including a novel (*April Fool's Day*, in ten languages), four story collections (*Infidelities*, *Yolk*, *Salvation and Other Disasters*, and *Heritage of Smoke*), and three collections of narrative essays as well as two books of practical criticism. His work was anthologized in *The Best American Poetry*, *The Pushcart Prize: Best, of the Small Presses*, and *The O. Henry Prize Stories*. He has received a Whiting Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, an Ingram Merrill Foundation Award, and an American Book Award, and in 2013 he was a Man Booker International Prize finalist. He teaches creative writing at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada.

FRANK GALUSZKA

Beirut (III), 2016
Oil on canvas, 20 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST