

## *Prologue*

### ANTON'S LEAP

When the trains collided, I was in drag, leaping from car to car; leaping in a white dress with large green polka dots and white cuff and bodice ruffles; leaping in stocking feet with a pair of white, open-toed, high heel shoes in my hand.

Rathjib, the cop, leaped after me.

We were 100 kilometers from Prague and I was a fraction of a kilometer ahead of Rathjib. I could outdistance Rathjib, leap on leap, of course. But, to where? The train engine? Then to where?

The collision solved that.

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I was still in drag when I finally focused.

I was lying on a bed and my head was propped up on two pillows. I lowered my eyes and saw my dress. It was dirty, of course, but the large polka dots were still bright green, and the white ruffles on the cuffs and on the bodice were not torn. Natalia, the Costume Mistress (she of the velvet hands), had fitted me on the train. "*When Natalia sews, the goddamned thing stays sewn,*" Natalia had said. True, the dress had survived the train collision, too; didn't have a rip or a pull or a tear anywhere, but I couldn't tell if the stockings were ripped. They had fallen and I could feel them bunched up around my ankles. So I reached down to pull them up, but a sharp pain in my right shoulder made me lie back. Then I heard the squeak. I moved my head and my gaze up to the foot of the bed.

I saw a woman in a rocking chair with a shawl around her head. The woman was nursing a child. The child was sucking on the woman's left breast. The child looked at me all the while it sucked. It was a long skinny child with blond curls, and it had on a dress. A girl child. Then I thought; no, maybe, like me, the baby is in drag. That struck me funny, so I laughed, which nearly killed me. Because of the pain.

When I focused again on the rocking lady, I saw that it wasn't a lady at all with a child at her breast—*IT WAS A NUN!* With a fat Leonardo DaVinci Christ-child in her lap, laughing at me! But then the nun took off her habit and it was—*MY CRAZY TWIN BROTHER VAHKTANG!* With a winged gargoyle in his arms. And the gargoyle was half baboon/half hawk, wore a tuxedo and screeched at me, with bloody talons clawing the air.

I closed my eyes because I knew the next transformation would be of Rathjib, the cop; the not-so-secret secret policeman; Rathjib, rocking in the rocking chair, holding a large pistol to his breast, blowing on the barrel, just waiting for me to wake up so that he could officially arrest me (*or even shoot me!*), because the “*little cunt*” had caused him so much trouble on the train and had dared to flee!

So I kept my eyes shut, shut very tight; tried to shut out this transformation *riff* that, knowing me, I could have kept *riffing* on—and on and on and on. Because Anton always went on *riffs*; language/thought/dream/feelings/fucking *riffs*.”

“*Riff*,” that wonderful word I first heard when an American jazz pianist played our village and I made up a dance to his playing, and that’s what he called the piano improvisations he did, “*a riff*,” and that I did in my dance, which he thought was pretty good for “*a cat who don’t know shit about riffing? But the trick, my man,*” he said, “*is never to lose hold of the central melody when you’re riffing; in your case, I can’t always find your central steps.*”

So I kept my eyes shut tight on that bed where I was in pain and still in drag in my white dress with green polka dots and rolled down stockings, trying to hold on to my “*central steps*,” and trying to cut out those transformation riffs altogether.

But that effort only made my head ache more and I had to moan and open my eyes again. And there, in the rocking chair, was the woman—the woman with the large dark eyes; the woman who literally had said the one word “*Deedo*,” whenever our eyes met on the train; the woman I called *Mlle. Charlotte du Val D’Ognes*; the woman who was part of the pornographic juggling troupe; the woman who had bashed Rathjib on the head; the woman who gave me a chance to run away from Rathjib, the cop on the train.

I knew that this transformation was not hallucinatory. The woman was real.

And the real woman smiled at me. I smiled back.

Then I stopped smiling because the smile caused me unbearable pain. But before I blacked out I had enough energy to ask her,

“*Do you know what happened to my high heel shoes?*”