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THE CRYSTAL TRAIN

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Chapter 1

Zagreb

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Pale in the face with circles under his eyes from stress, Borna walks back and forth in an empty classroom of the Zagreb Conservatory. He is dressed like a groom, his black smoking shining elegantly in the dusty sadness that surrounds him. It's cold and the small kerosene heater that saturates the air with its dank odor is unable to contrast the freeze, which has been crystallizing the city for days.

Borna's tormented steps are like those of a caged rodent. He hears them creaking underneath him, like a convict sentenced to death walking over the rickety planks of the gallows.

Eighteen years old as of today and already six and a half feet tall, Borna is the only child of two factory employees who have been working for decades for Croatia's largest producer of bouillon cubes. Never a minute late and not one written warning: they only receive praises for their impeccable conduct, mechanical and repetitive like certain kinds of beetles, capable of pushing countless balls of dung without ever getting tired.

On the classroom walls, there is a crucifix hanging with its eternal sorrow, and a large map of Europe with the mountains in relief – except for Serbia's, which were flattened by the wrathful punch of a student. There is also a small mirror. Borna looks at his reflection: he straightens his bowtie and checks his teeth to make sure there aren't any traces of the chocolates he devoured while waiting anxiously.

Everything has to be memorable today, no details can be left to chance.

Borna's mother made this abundantly clear while the tailor from Via Ilica measured her son's chest to alter the jacket, shirt, and vest to fit his convex chest's deformity: bony and protruding like a pigeon's.

"It's all in your hands, Borna. The factory owner and the other managers will also be sitting next to your father and me in the first row. They're important people, we can't afford to disappoint them now that we finally have a chance to impress them, to prove that we're more than just line workers, or scum, as they think. Do you understand? These pianist hands, the long tapering fingers that God gave you, so thin and nimble, I recognized them immediately when you were born. And I realized that we could become a prestigious and respected family thanks to you.

"But if you make a mistake, if you fall short, our dream of admiration will turn into a nightmare of shame. Everybody will laugh at us. And it will be unbearable, as well as humiliating.

"Remember, my son: excellence won't cut it. It's just not enough. To really overturn other people's perception of our family, you'll need perfection. The same as an Olympic champion: a perfect ten. Got it?"

"Got it, mom," is all Borna said while the tailor, bent in front of him, measured his skinny naked legs covered by thick blond hair. In the meantime, Mrs. Golda Barcic stood on her tiptoes and caressed her son's face, which she seldom did. She turned to the tailor, whom they would pay with several of their overtimes, and said sternly, "For that price, Mr. Pogorelic, my son's suit better be absolutely impeccable." Then, clearly enunciating every syllable, she repeated, "IM-PEC-CABLE."

"It will be, Mrs. Barcic... it will be..." He reassured her, holding the pinhead of a needle between his lips. The yellow measuring tape dangling from his left hand looked like the tail of a rat in his hairy fingers.

"But don't make the suspenders out of silk. Use a cheaper fabric since no one will see them. Those knee-high socks already cost as much as an entire day of work!"

"Naturally, Mrs. Barcic. As you wish. But the lapels of the jacket will have to be silk, and the lining

should be satin. We will have to cover the buttons in grosgrain. And the trim covering the external seams of the pants from the waist to the hem will also have to be silk. Otherwise it wouldn't be a smoking..."

"Fine, Mr. Pogorelic. But, as I already told you, I won't compromise on the cuffs! There have to be turn-ups, and they will have to be abundant: Borna keeps on growing day after day, and we certainly can't throw away a suit like this for a few extra inches. Can you imagine? It would be insane!"

Mrs. Barcic had never been a client of his before then and it was unlikely that she would return in the future. But to make her happy, the tailor ended up making her a smoking with cuffs on the pants, how absurd! Something like that had never been seen before, and anyone even remotely familiar with the concept of elegance would find it ridiculous.

"Poor boy," thought the man as he measured Borna's bony thighs. He jotted down the measly numbers on a recycled strip of paper, to save money.

"If I get a big applause and the audience asks for an encore, I decided I'll play *Les cyclopes* by Jean-Philippe Rameau," announced Borna, standing in his underwear in the faint warmth of Mr. Pogorelic's elegant tailor's shop.

The cyclops: his mother and father. Giants with just one eye: critical, stern, never satisfied. And lacking the other eye, the benevolent one, tolerant, capable of compassion and empathy.

In reality, Mihov and Golda Barcic had never been proud of their only son. Borna knew it well, he noticed it when he was still a little boy. He realized, therefore, that he couldn't waste this long-awaited and theatrical occasion to earn their love.