

DAVE FROMM

TRAILER

WITH A MINUTE ON THE CLOCK, New Jersey's own Imbo Imbock snatches an outlet pass out of the gym air and blurs like a bad thought into the middle of the floor, slows imperceptibly as he crosses half court and, as always, weighs his options.

Imbo's adopted team, Sparta Praha of the Czech First Division, leads host Rimini by three and, off a turnover, jumps out on a break. On Imbo's left, his big man, Slava Cyrk, picks up speed like a boulder rolling down a hill. On his right, shooting guard Benno Honzlik is streaking down the wing, a shoulder ahead of his Italian defender. There's another defender backpedaling in front of Imbo, and a third, a towering slick-skinned forward, camped out below the hoop.

Imbo pushes the ball out in front of him, dangling it at the end of his fingertips like a yo-yo. His palms tingle from the outlet, as if the ball itself is energized. Protocol says feed Slava, you always reward a big man—to keep him happy—when he runs the floor. But Imbo knows the limits of Slava's game, knows that he can't ask Slava to put the ball on the floor at this speed.

The better dish is to fleet Benno, who can rise and finish with his right hand. But Benno is going to fade, Imbo just knows it. Benno is going to peel off his lane and fade out to the three-point line, waving his arms and calling for the ball like a Sunday morning pickup player. It's probably still the better play, Slava down low for the rebound, Imbo draw-

ing Benno's defender with a drive before kicking the pass out. Of course, Imbo can also just keep the ball, go to the hole hard and take the hit.

Benno has already started to slow, his defender hesitating, caught between Benno and the ball, and Imbo, a step above the top of the key, settles on the kick-out. A change of speed, a shift of a shoulder, and he has it set up—but Jesus they should get something better—and then, in the instant before Imbo commits, he hears, *feels*, a wave of motion behind him, someone racing down the center of the court in his wake. A voice floats out—*here*—and then Imbo is crossing the ball from right to left and knifing to the left of the foul line—as the first defender scuttles to get in front of him—feinting to Slava, whose pupils widen, hands go up. Imbo sees the back-line defender bite on the fake, shifting his weight towards Slava and bracing for a collision and, as he does, Imbo drops the ball behind his back, on the bounce, to his as-yet-unseen trailer, whose path to the rim is suddenly, magically, wide open. Imbo doesn't even wait for the lay-up. It's all faith—faith and geometry.

TWO MONTHS EARLIER, at the end of the summer of 1998, Imbo sat in the long oak balcony bar of Prague's art-deco Hotel Kafka with the cousins Occhiogrosso: Giuseppe, a lanky small forward for Rimini Moretti of the Liga d'Adriatico on the Italian seaboard, and Carmine, an Italian of the American variety, who had traded the gritty junior colleges and ersatz glitter of Atlantic City for the promiscuous capitalism of Central Europe. On the café floor below them, stunning Czech molls drifted among western businessmen, waiters served slices of Sacher torte on waxed paper, and cigarette smoke drifted up in ribbons from crystal ashtrays. Through it, Imbo looked out the tall windows that fronted onto Parizka Street and watched people move between panes.

Carmine was the only other westerner on the Sparta Praha squad. First Division regulations allowed two non-Czechs per roster, and when Bubba Gourds, a hulking center from Tulsa, separated his shoulder in training camp, Carmine scrambled onto the squad. As a player, Carmine was a garbage man, a joyful opportunist. Whereas Imbo's particular on-court gift was creating space, conducting the sudden part and pause of human traffic, Carmine's was filling the voids, flying headlong to the hoop, gnawing into the cracks around the pivot, dealing the currency of elbows and knees.

"Here's to Quad City," Carmine said, "wherever the hell that is."

They touched glasses, and Imbo raised a dark, sweet beer to his lips. It tasted of malt and left behind a moustache of foam.

“Drink up while you can, my man,” Carmine said. “Where you’re going, no more Mestian, no more Radegast.”

“It’s in Iowa,” Imbo said, between sips. “Quad City. But I haven’t decided yet. I might not go.”

Guiseppe shook his head. “I had Coors Light once, in Boston,” he said, frowning. “Coors Light, not so good.”

The slim letter in Imbo’s breast pocket had come ten days earlier from the head coach of the Quad City Thunder, inviting him to their November training camp in Davenport. The Thunder occupied the upper echelon of Continental Basketball Association talent, such as it was, perhaps a player away from making a run at that league’s modest title. The letter to Imbo had arrived inconspicuously, lying flat in his mail slot among the indecipherable bills and fliers of Czech commerce, and promised a spot on the team and a chance to showcase his game to the occasional NBA scout. They’re pretty desperate, Imbo had thought, if they’re scouting in the Czech First Division, but he held the letter’s watermarked pages close to his face, so that the gilded Thunder logo nearly touched his nose, and breathed in the Iowan steppes and the familiarity. He’d been carrying it around with him, like a visa or a talisman, ever since.

Guiseppe pointed to a frosted bottle along the mirrored back of the bar.

“There,” he said to Carmine, “you see?”

Carmine followed Guiseppe’s finger and nodded. “Absinthe,” he said, tapping Imbo with an elbow.

Imbo looked up at the bottle, which was green and sturdy, almost medicinal, the kind of bottle you might see brandished like a club in a Western. He shrugged to Carmine. “I thought that absinthe was illegal.”

“Only in European Union,” Guiseppe responded, “and, of course, United States.”

“And it’s not *that* illegal in the EU,” Carmine said. “I mean, you can get it anywhere, if you know where to look. You know who drank that stuff all the time?”

“John Major,” said Guiseppe.

"That's right," Carmine said, lowering his voice, "the motherfucking British Prime Minister."

"Shut up," Imbo said.

"Swear to God."

"Fuck off. John Major did not drink absinthe."

"Swear to God it's true," Carmine insisted.

"You could see it in his face," said Guiseppe, nodding.

Imbo shook his head and sipped his beer.

"And he's not the only one," Carmine continued. "I mean, there's a reason the French are so blissed out. Amsterdam, Berlin, you name it, you can get absinthe there. Except the States."

Guiseppe leaned in to Imbo. "That is where we come in," he whispered.

"We got a cousin in New York," said Carmine, his face creased with a grin, "owns a bar in Manhattan, wants us to send him a couple of cases to see if it catches on."

Manhattan, where Imbo had completed half a year of a law degree, seemed to his memory like some vast teeming ship, a massive galleon perpetually at sea and plundering. "You just going to FedEx it, huh?"

"Can't FedEx it," Carmine said, dismissing the suggestion as though he had already considered it. "We got a cousin, though, in the Navy. Navy doesn't go through customs. He's on a frigate in the Adriatic, and if we can get him a couple of cases, he'll drop them off the next time his ship ports, which, believe it or not . . ."

"Is in Manhattan," Guiseppe finished.

The cousins smiled at each other.

"To the global reach of the Occhiogrossos," Imbo laughed, raising his glass.

Carmine held his index finger aloft. "Our time will come," he said.

HOURS LATER, when Imbo left Carmine and Guiseppa to their quicksilver schemes and stepped outside onto the uneven cobblestones of Parizka Street, the moon was full in the sky and haloed with light. In front of the Hotel Kafka, a young woman stood in the golden spotlight of a lamppost. She had honeyed hair and cut a shadow that slalomed like a luge course beneath her. Her left elbow was in her right hand, and a ribbon of smoke twirled upward from her cigarette. Imbo recognized her from the Hotel's lobby, hours earlier, when she had been on the arm of a silver-haired businessman who ordered vodkas in a loud bluegrass twang. Imbo scanned the sidewalk. No sign of bluegrass now.

"Dobry vecer," Imbo tried. *Good evening.* Imbo had played in Prague for a year and a half, but his Czech was still limited to what he picked up on the court or from the subtitles of American movies. He'd been briefly enrolled in a language class but found little application for the phrases they had been forced to memorize, among them, "I would like four soups" and "one way, sir, to Bratislava."

She nodded at him. For a moment, her eyes met his in a gaze that managed to seem blank and beckoning at the same time, as if she was authorizing something she would assess later, and then she turned away and exhaled a cloud into the moonlight. Imbo dug his hands into his pockets and bounced lightly on the balls of his feet, trying to think of how to proceed. Down the street, a taxi pulled up and shed a fare. The young woman gave Imbo a quick look, a half-grin, tilting her head towards the cab.

"Okay," she said. "C'au." *Bye.* Crushing her cigarette at the end of a long tapered leg, she strode off down the street.

Imbo watched her walk to the cab, hips swaying like the hood of a cobra, and get in. "Jeziz Maria," he whistled softly, and turned back to the Skodas parked in lines along the shadowy street.

It had been a while since he'd tried to make time with someone. There was a college girl Imbo had left behind after graduation, when he found himself unmoored and simply floated away. The people he knew in law school were serious and exhausted and inclined to throw themselves desperately into sex. He had dated one during that first semester, a lean but strenuous second-year clawing her way through the class rankings. When he decided to split, she had offered to wait for him and lavish him with the perks of her success, if that's what he wanted. She had weathered the first three months of his first season with Sparta

Praha, writing letters and even coming over during March break, but was gone soon after, hitched to the rocket of corporate America. Imbo's teammates, meanwhile, all made a point of mentioning their sister or cousin or niece whose English was bad, very bad, and would he consider a little private tutoring? She's a good student, they'd say, and she invariably was, until the lesson ended, and she'd ask in perfect English if she could make Imbo dinner.

Carmine's Skoda was blue with gray doors donated by some other car. In its back seat, Imbo could see a basketball, sneakers, a pair of pants, a box of fliers for a disco night Carmine had organized at Radost FX and a pair of Soviet-era "night-vision" infrared goggles left over from a now-abandoned scheme in which Carmine would export defunct Russian military paraphernalia—bought at swap meets on the Polish border—to a cousin in Texas.

"What are people going to do with night-vision goggles in Texas?" Imbo had asked at the time.

"Are you kidding?" Carmine had said, looking at Imbo like he was crazy. "Fucking everything, man."

Imbo got into the Skoda—it was one of the few models in Prague you could leave unlocked and not lose to the Yugoslav chop shops—and felt under the seat for Carmine's keys. The engine rolled grudgingly and coughed to life. It was late. Imbo had to get back to Prague 6, and Carmine, who lived in the City Center, could walk home. Imbo would return the car tomorrow. Carmine might not even miss it.

Imbo shoved the car into gear and prepared to pull out, but as he did a cab squealed to a halt next to him. Imbo looked over. The young woman and the cabbie got out, screaming at each other. The cabbie was swarthy and thick-bellied, and when he grabbed the young woman by the arm she shook like a doll.

Imbo jumped out of the Skoda and raised his arms.

"Hey!" he yelled, trying to remember how to say something else in Czech. The local English language newspaper had recently printed a page of useful phrases, but the only one that leapt to mind was "Don't shoot, I'm Canadian."

The cabbie, slurring in some guttural consonant-heavy tongue, released the woman's arm and turned his florid belligerent jowls on Imbo. He seemed the type with little to lose. Imbo balled his hand into an uncer-

tain fist and stepped forward, but before he got closer, the woman swung her long leg up and snapped the toe of her boot flush into the man's unprotected groin.

"Ti vole!" she shouted. *You ox.*

The cabbie let out a muffled grunt, the noise of a man devastatingly disarmed, and crumpled back into the car. Imbo grabbed at him through the window, but he threw the car into gear and sped off down the street.

"Goddamned Russian," the woman said in English. "Goddamned dirty Russian."

"Are you okay?" Imbo asked, stepping towards her.

"Wanted 300 crowns to go to Hradcanska, 'that or a blow-job,' he said," she spat, calling down the street after the taillights. "Dirty Russian. Take your pickled dick back to Moscow!"

She paused, breathing heavily. Her eyes shone wetly in the lamplight.

"Are you all right?" Imbo asked again. He considered reaching for her, but she stamped her foot in a manner that reminded him she was still booted.

"Yes, I am fine," she said, but her brow wrinkled with anger. She put her hands on her hips and took quick breaths.

Imbo looked down Parizka into the gathering gloom. "Hradcanska is in Prague 6, right?"

"Yes." She wiped a tear from her cheek. "Why?"

"Well," Imbo said, as bells rang midnight, "I'm going that way."

MY NAME IS MARTINA BARROVA," she said, as the car rattled along shadowy avenues. She was twenty-three, two years younger than Imbo, and halfway through a degree in renaissance architecture at Charles University. She kept her right hand in the pocket of her coat. Imbo didn't know what, if anything, she was holding and didn't want to find out.

"What are you doing in Prague," Martina Barrova asked as the Skoda chugged through the nighttime traffic. "You are a businessman, yes?"

"No," said Imbo. "I play basketball for Sparta Praha."

"You are not Czech," Martina Barrova said, looking Imbo up and down. "And you are a little short for basketball, I think."

"You don't believe me?"

He looked at her. She narrowed her eyes and thought for a moment, then nodded as if resolved.

"I don't believe you."

Imbo shook his head. A lot of people didn't believe he was a basketball player. Really, it was kind of a joke, a myth Imbo perpetuated down dwindling avenues. At 6'1", Imbo had been a very good small-college player, the best in the Patriot League his senior year at Holy Cross, and had played well after graduation in a summer pro-am league in New York, but then he blew his knee out and shelved hoop dreams in favor of the mundane security of a law degree. Imbo was on academic scholarship, but halfway through that first year at Columbia, after months of gravelly lectures and with his knee rehabbed and pink like a newborn, he had found himself less and less engaged in the daily activities of life, drifting along like a plastic bag in a breeze, full of loneliness and some unstated dread. He would arrive home to his empty apartment sometimes and realize that he hadn't spoken to another person the entire day. When winter classes ended, he called a friend he knew in Prague, where Holy Cross had played once in a college summer tour, and a month later, in the spring of 1996, arrived at Prague's Ruzyně Airport with a pair of sneakers, a knee brace and a two year furlough from Columbia. If he returned by the end of 1998, he could pick up where he had left off. If he didn't, his admission would be revoked and his scholarship lost.

"We have a game tomorrow night," Imbo said. "Why don't you come watch?"

"Yeah, sure," Martina Barrova said, raising her chin to Imbo as if to say *nice try*. She was silent for a moment and then shook her head. "Anyway, I am busy tomorrow night."

They crossed the dark silent Vltava at Manesov Bridge, passing beneath the bronze gaze of the martyred St. John of Nepomuk. Ahead of them, floodlights illuminated Prague Castle, looming and glowing above the terraces of Mala Strana. Neither of them spoke, but Martina Barrova took her hand out of her pocket long enough to roll down her

window. Imbo did the same, and the smells of coal and lavender filled the car.

When they reached the wide avenues and tram tracks of Hradcanska, Martina Barrova gestured for Imbo to stop.

“Dekujime mostat,” she said in the yellow oval of the ceiling light, and smiled. “Thank you very much, in English.”

“You’re welcome,” Imbo said, as she got out of the car and leaned down to the open window. “Our game’s at 7:30 tomorrow, at Sparta Hall over by Letenske Gardens, if your plans change.”

She smiled again, her eyes like almonds, her cheekbones like levees. “What is your name, anyway?”

Imbo fixed her with an intense stare and revved the engine. “Jsem netopir,” he said and winked. *I am Batman.*

Imbo popped the clutch, and the Skoda squealed back into traffic. Martina Barrova watched as it roared up to a corner, choked into a stall, then started again and vanished into the night.

SPARTA PRAHA CARRIED a nine-game winning streak into its matchup with Pybyl, a team from Prague’s industrial suburbs. In Sparta Praha’s locker room, Imbo’s teammates grunted and farted and passed around the Quad City Thunder letter like samizdat. The team had won sixteen of its twenty games and sat atop the First Division, but most of the players would have had trouble making Imbo’s Holy Cross teams. Benno, with his lovely shooting stroke, and Slava, whose arms draped nearly to his knees, would have an outside chance. But even they would have been confounded by the Patriot League’s quickness and physicality, and the Patriot League was a mediocre league. It was what made Imbo such a novelty in the First Division. Few other guards had the body to hulk up on their men, to put a hand on their hipbone and just guide them around on defense like they were waltzing. And nobody penetrated like Imbo; nobody got into the middle of the lane and made the ball vanish only to reappear in the hands of an open teammate or kissed off the glass into the hoop.

“Where is Quad City?” asked Michal, the backup center, as Imbo laced up his sneakers.

"Iowa," Imbo said.

"Oh," nodded Michal, eating a banana. "I was once in Boston. Have you been to Boston?"

Imbo nodded.

"I saw the hockey. The Boston Bruins," Michal said. "You know it?"

Imbo nodded again. This was how it went. Whenever possible, his teammates brought up hockey, a real sport, a Czech sport. In the spring it would be tennis.

"Boston Bruins," Slava said, waving a link of sausage—his pre-game snack—at Imbo. "Boston Bruins, full of . . . ham."

Imbo nodded again.

"I have gone to Iowa," Benno shouted across the locker room. "When I was a young boy, we went to Iowa to visit my mother's cousin."

He ran over to Imbo and sat down, his arm around Imbo's shoulder. He fixed Imbo with a serious look. "Are you sure you want to go to Iowa, Imbo?"

"I haven't decided yet," Imbo said. "The money is better."

"You want to get discovered by NBA, right?" Benno said.

Imbo shrugged his shoulders. "Sure, but I don't think that will happen."

Imbo figured that confidence was something every athlete needed, that doubt was self-fulfilling, but he also thought it important to be pragmatic. His evanescent NBA dreams had maybe two more years before they dissolved altogether, and the CBA would be as close as he had ever come. It was the only real reason to spend a winter in Iowa, deep in snow and smorgasbords, the chance that some NBA guy would swing by and dole out a ten-day contract on a hard-working role player like Imbo. Then things would get interesting. But other times he thought about the desperation of a CBA bench, men who played ball with the joy of mercenaries, the cuts he would ask his knees to make, the picks that would rattle his vertebrae. He imagined young urban kids on the fringes, with GEDs and legs like stovepipes, leveraging on quickness and fleeting youth in places like Cedar Rapids, or Tulsa, or Albany.

"You can always stay with us, Imbo," Slava called out and tossed a piece of sausage across the room.

"If you make NBA, Imbo, will you send us tickets to the games?" Benno asked.

"No," said Imbo, kicking the sausage with his sneaker. "Not a chance."

Tip-off was half an hour off, and everyone but Carmine was changed and ready to take the court. Suddenly, Carmine burst into the locker room.

"Ahoj," he shouted, raising his arms. He waved a piece of paper. "Gentlemen, I invite you all to the beautiful Italian coastline!"

"Ahoj, ti vole," said Slava, as the players gathered around Carmine.

"There's a tournament in Ravenna in October, a friendly," Carmine said. He was waving a letter written in Italian, all lyrical accents and vowels like sheet music. It bore the lucrative swirling letterhead of the Liga d'Adriatico. "My cousin Guisepe's team is one of the hosts. They're going to sponsor us."

Three of Pybyl's starting five wore elbow pads and swung their arms with blue-collar intent, and by the second half Carmine had a bloody nose and Slava had been ejected. Still, Sparta Praha had an eighteen-point lead and was cruising. Benno finished a fast break with a dunk off a no-look pass from Imbo, and Michal blocked three straight Pybyl shots. During a time-out Imbo looked into the stands and saw the golden locks and slim shoulders of Martina Barrova. She was looking into her lap, but then raised her eyes to Imbo and grinned. Pointing her finger at him, she mouthed one word, "Batman", and shook her head no.

OVER THE NEXT WEEKS, as summer turned into fall and Sparta Praha finished its run through the First Division standings, Imbo made international calls to Davenport and Columbia, confirming his obligations and opportunities. The Thunder needed him in Davenport by the end of October to start training camp on November 2. Columbia needed a commitment by mid-November to hold his scholarship for the beginning of the spring semester.

Imbo began to see Martina Barrova every day, meeting her outside the University and strolling through the thin alleys of Kampa Island. She asked him questions about basketball and America, brought him to a lecture on Czech films. They drifted in a flat boat on the river, Imbo

pushing a pole into the water, and Martina Barrova laughing at his balance. They sat in the balcony at the Agneszky Cloister and listened to a floating, haunting Dvorak concertina.

Martina Barrova lived in an apartment on a long elm-lined avenue called Biscupskova, and Imbo would kick the leaves as they walked along like he kicked the maple leaves in Worcester years before. Her apartment was small and neat, and the first morning Imbo awoke there, three weeks after the Pybyl game, he lay silently with her hair washing over his cheeks. Their clothes were strewn across the room, but she had left an earring in, a small shiny gem, and it spun like a satellite across Imbo's horizon.

IT WAS LATE OCTOBER, and the noontime crowd had gathered beneath the astrological clock as Imbo crossed the Old Town Square and headed towards the Hotel Kafka. Through its tall windows, he could see Carmine waving at him.

"I've got it," Carmine said, when Imbo crossed the lobby. "Three cases of absinthe."

Imbo slid into the booth next to him. "Where'd you get it?"

"From a guy."

"Not another cousin, right?"

"No, another guy, up on the Polish border." Carmine was talking in a whisper. "They still make it up there."

"I don't understand," Imbo said. "If it's legal, why is it so hard to get?"

"Well," Carmine said, "it's legal, but I think there's still this general perception that it, you know, messes you up pretty good."

"Oh." Imbo looked around and leaned in to Carmine. "Where is it now?"

"It's in the trunk of the Skoda, back at my place."

"And you're going to take it to Italy?"

"Yeah."

"And what?"

“And, after our game, Guiseppe and I are going to meet my cousin on the docks and give it to him.”

“How much money are you making?” Imbo asked.

“Four thousand dollars apiece,” Carmine said. “Seed money. We’ll negotiate a regular fare once we fully understand the market.”

Imbo considered the plan, the late-night rendezvous with a frigate, the contraband, the exchanges. How spectacularly dumb, he thought. How marvelous. Imbo looked around the lobby at the Sunday crowd of the Hotel Kafka. Garish day-glow tourists mingled with swollen entrepreneurs intent on privatizing the cobblestones beneath their feet, and all around them, in the ornate nooks and snugs of the place, pockets of people, Czechs and ex-pats like himself, on the edge of some scheme, dreaming. Imbo smiled.

“Well,” he said, “I think we should at least taste the stuff first.”

IMBO WAITED IN THE COURTYARD of the Bethlehem Chapel until the three-o-clock mass let out and Martina Barrova emerged. The sun was still high in the sky, and as they strolled along the river, Imbo offered her his arm. She took it.

“So I’ve got this trip to Italy,” he said. “And then, I don’t know.”

She smiled and nodded. “Have you been to Italy before?”

“No,” Imbo said, listening for something—anything—in her voice.

“It is a beautiful place.” She was gazing out at the river. “It rolls like a dream.”

They passed by the statue of St. John of Nepomuk.

“So you’ve been there?” Imbo said.

“Yes. In grade school our teachers took us to Italy for a week.” She shielded her eyes from the sun and looked at Imbo. “I was only little, but that’s when I decided to study architecture. Because people could build such things, like reflections of their spirit. They could see it, you know? Prague is like that, beautiful but old. The new things are shit.” She waved her hand up and down the riverbank.

“I don’t think it’s that bad.”

"I tell you what," she said. "I will build something beautiful here, and someday when you come back to Prague, you can see it."

Imbo smiled. Yeah, of course, that would have to be it. "Okay," he said.

Martina Barrova gestured for him to wait and vanished for a moment in the crowds around the trinket stands at the bridge. When she returned, she offered Imbo her hand. Imbo took it.

"So it is a deal," she said.

"Deal."

She smiled a small smile. "Here," she said. In her other hand was a small envelope, maybe two inches wide. Imbo took it.

"What's this?" he asked, tipping the contents into his hand. A long thin chain piled in his palm like sand. At the end of it was a small metal circle carved with an image of a saint.

"It is St. John of Nepomuk," Martina Barrova said. "Like the statue. He is our favorite saint."

Imbo looked at the tiny man on the emblem. He stood in profile with the Castle in the background.

"What did he do again?" Imbo asked.

"He heard the confession of the princess, and he kept it even when the prince threatened him."

"Oh," said Imbo. "What'd the prince do?"

"The prince put him in a bag and threw him off the bridge."

Imbo stepped to the edge of the bridge and looked down into the cold rapids below. Martina Barrova leaned against him.

"So don't tell anyone about our deal," she laughed.

Imbo looked at her. The breeze was pushing her hair across her face.

"Your secret's safe with me."

She looked away and nodded.

“Okay, then. So tonight you go out with your friend?”

Imbo remembered Carmine and the absinthe.

“Yeah,” he said. “And we’re taking off early next week for Ravenna.”

“Well . . . So.” Martina Barrova took Imbo’s hands in her own. “I understand that you have to go. It was so nice. Maybe someday you’ll come back. If you have time before you leave, okay. If not, that’s okay too.” She released his hands and took a step back. “If you see me, you see me. I will be here.”

She waved to him and turned and walked away.

CARMINE AND IMBO slipped into a shadowy upstairs booth at the Hotel Kafka with a pitcher of water, a stack of sugar cubes and two deep snifters. Carmine produced a frosted green bottle from under his coat. Imbo took out the Quad City letter and a weary wrinkled sleeve of paper—his plane ticket, purchased nearly two years earlier at LaGuardia, the return date blank and open-ended until just this past Monday, when Imbo had fixed it for October 28, six days away, leaving out of Milan. A connection could take him to Davenport, depending. He laid both documents on the table.

Carmine uncorked the bottle and poured three fingers’ worth of liquor in each glass. It was thick and syrupy. Imbo tried to remember what he knew of absinthe, vague fragments from a college English class, things about wormwood and hallucinations and syphilitic French poets. They added water and sugar to the mix and the glasses began to churn and swirl, the liquid turning opalescent like the inside of a seashell.

Imbo touched his glass to Carmine’s. “Sparta Praha,” he said, for no reason he could think of. He closed his eyes and took a sip. Shortly, he took another, and another. Carmine refilled their glasses; they twirled the liquor in their palms, held it on their tongues. It tasted smooth and bittersweet like the residue of a dream. After the third glass, Imbo took one document in each hand and, with all his concentration, tried to weigh them like a scale.

A waiter stopped by, asked if they needed anything. Carmine laughed.

Imbo looked up from his scale, and beckoned the waiter closer.

"One way, sir," he whispered, in impeccable Czech, "to Bratislava."

THE NEXT THING IMBO KNEW, he was sitting on a curb, surrounded by fallen leaves and smoking. Carmine's Skoda was on his left, halfway up the curb, one tire flat and dented.

"I want to tell you something," said a voice from his right. Imbo looked over at Carmine, who was wearing his night-vision goggles. The goggles had red lenses that protruded from Carmine's face like stalks and gave off a vaguely nuclear hum.

"My name is Occhiogrosso," Carmine said. His voice sounded rough and gravelly, like he was croaking. A cigarette smoldered at his lips. "Do you know what that means?"

Imbo sat silently, trying to remember when they had left the Kafka, and why.

"Occhiogrosso," Carmine continued. "It means bug-eyes."

Imbo remembered wanting to see Martina Barrova, wanting to tell her something important. He looked up at the street sign. Biscupskova.

"Do you see my bug-eyes?" Carmine asked, leaning close to Imbo. He lifted the lenses from his face so that he was staring at Imbo. His voice dropped to a raspy, almost frightened, whisper. "Do you see my bug-eyes?"

He stayed there for a moment, close enough for Imbo to smell the vague hint of summer on his breath. Then he leaned in, quickly, and planted a hard kiss on Imbo's cheek.

"Go to your girl," he said. "Tell her to come to Italy."

Imbo sat for a moment, looking at Carmine. He reached out and took the goggles from Carmine's head. They slipped snugly and humming on Imbo. He lowered the lens stalks over his eyes with a click, and the world submerged into a green shadow. In it, Carmine glowed a pale red. Imbo reached out and put a hand on Carmine's shoulder.

"Occhiogrosso," he said. "Your time will come."

Then he ran off down the street towards Martina Barrova's apartment.

IMBO DIDN'T KNOW what time it was, but the apartments lining Biscupskova were dark and silent. A metal lattice climbed the wall outside Martina Barrova's flat, and Imbo scaled up to the second floor where her bedroom window opened onto the night. Imbo leaned his face in and whispered, "Martina," but there was no answer. He climbed inside. Ravenna would be good. Martina Barrova could come to Ravenna, and then, who knows? Maybe she'd come a little further. To where, though? Imbo put his head down and closed his eyes. He imagined Martina Barrova in New York, strolling along Madison Avenue like she owned it. He tried to imagine her in Iowa, but saw only wide stubbly unshaven jaws of corn.

Headlights arching along the cobblestones below woke him. A black sedan pulled up in front of Martina Barrova's apartment. When the interior light flickered on, Imbo lifted the goggles from his eyes and saw Martina Barrova sitting in the passenger seat and a florid silver-haired man at the wheel. Imbo recognized him from the lobby of the Hotel Kafka, weeks earlier.

Imbo couldn't hear what they were saying but saw Martina lift her hand to her face and wipe her eyes. The man reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a slim leather billfold. He counted out green American bills, perhaps a dozen, and pushed the money to Martina, who took it. Then the man leaned over and opened the door on Martina Barrova's side of the car. His face was flushed. He made sharp chops with his hands. Martina Barrova's back was to Imbo, and he couldn't see her face.

Imbo sat in the darkness of Martina Barrova's living room. He heard her feet on the stairs and then the key in the latch. The door swung open and framed him in a rectangle of hall light. Martina Barrova jumped when she saw him.

"Jeziz Maria," she said, as she stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. "Imbo. You almost gave me a heart attack!" She put her hand to her chest.

They stood in the shadowy foyer. Imbo sighed and looked away. "You were seen."

Martina Barrova was silent for a long second. "So," she said finally. "Well, that is a shame."

Imbo lowered the goggles to his eyes. Martina Barrova glowed a bright red. "You were seen," he said again, touching his fingers to the lenses.

"Do you want me to tell you," Martina Barrova said. "Or do you want to just sit there and stare."

"I want to just sit here and stare," Imbo said. He felt like a fool. "Then I want to leave this behind."

"I'm pregnant," Martina Barrova said. "I made a mess of it."

She put her hand to her mouth, as if she was about to fall apart. But she did not.

"It was before you," she said. "It is not yours."

Imbo pushed back against the chair so that the front legs left the ground. He felt suddenly empty, gutted, as if some thin blade had slid inside and let his organs out. Martina took a step towards him. He put a hand up.

"Just," he said, looking for words, keeping her off of him for the moment. His impulse was to jump up, blow by her, race away. She would never catch him.

"You're pregnant?"

Martina nodded.

"Were you going to tell me?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe, eventually. If I had to."

"Jesus Christ," Imbo said, and spread his arms out. He remembered his surprise at seeing her in the stands at the Pybyl game. Of course it made sense now. The Hotel Kafka, the bluegrass entrepreneurs, the sudden need for a chump. What a joke had been played on him. What tragic comedy.

He lifted the goggles from his eyes and looked at Martina Barrova. "What were you doing here?"

She shrugged and breathed out heavily. "Supporting myself, going to school. It wasn't sex, not usually. We would just, I don't know, be with them, in the bars, at the restaurants. Sometimes things would go further. Sometimes they went too far. That's why I stopped."

"Got it," Imbo said, and hated the clip in his voice. He wanted to be out

of there, moving away, on the periphery looking in, but it was all he could do to stand up. "And I was the fall guy, right? I was the mark."

Martina walked to him. He heard her breath catch in her throat.

"Maybe," she said, "you were Batman," and leaned in to kiss him on the cheek. Imbo felt the tears on her skin. Then she was gone, into her bedroom, and her outline vanished behind the closing door.

THE LAY-UP PUTS SPARTA PRAHA UP FIVE with 35 seconds to play and, when Rimini Moretti calls a dejected timeout, whistles rain down from the partisan stands. The game becomes a foul-shooting contest, and Imbo hits six in a row to ice it for Sparta.

After the game, Imbo and Carmine wrap the bottles of absinthe in tube socks and split them between two backpacks.

"Bad luck for Guiseppe," says Imbo, as they wheel two bicycles away from the Sparta bus and pedal towards the harbor. Guiseppe had blown his knee out in the Liga finals just two weeks before the tournament and had watched the game in a brace from his hip to his heel.

There's a full moon, and riding along through the chilly October night they chase their shadows down the street. Imbo rubs the soreness from his thighs and imagines the Manhattan skyline made out of corn stalks and wild gargantuan kernels lining the streets like taxicabs.

"If this works, I'll need a partner for a while," Carmine says, laughing. "Maybe Benno will help."

They reach the Ravenna docks, and Carmine swings off his bike. He digs his hands deep into his pocket and bounces slightly on the balls of his feet. He looks nervous. "Hey," he says, "Guiseppe said his coach was asking about you. Says he wants you to come play for them."

"Where's your trawler," Imbo says.

"They make money, you know. Not this First Division shit," Carmine snaps. "And it's not a trawler, it's a frigate. A fucking frigate. And he's not, you know, sailing the whole frigate in here. He's coming in a little boat."

They're silent for a few minutes. Finally, Imbo says, "So you'll be here for a while, then?"

Carmine nods. "I guess so. If this smuggling thing works out. And I like playing ball." He shrugs his shoulders. "It beats anything I'd be doing at home."

Imbo feels the medallion under his shirt, the patron saint of Prague. "Do you think Martina Barrova would have come to Italy with me?"

"Yeah, to Italy," Carmine says. "Sure. But then what?"

What indeed, Imbo thinks. That's the joke.

Carmine reaches into his backpack and pulls out a small package wrapped with a bow.

"A going-away present," he says.

Imbo takes it and sits on the edge of a dock. Beneath him the water shines in the moonlight. He pulls the wrapping off his present and holds a pair of night-vision goggles.

"So you can see where you're going," Carmine says. "Get it?"

Imbo looks at them. "I thought you only had one pair."

"I got another, when I got the absinthe," Carmine says, smiling, and pulls his own goggles from his coat. He puts his goggles on, and Imbo does the same.

"Now we wait for the little boat," Carmine says.

They sit in silence on the dock, scanning the water through their heat-sensitive lenses. The midnight sky glows green with diamonds, and the sea air sweeps against Imbo's cheek, cool and particular. It feels like strands of hair, or crackling electrons. In Prague, in December, they would put great vats of Christmas carp on snowy sidewalks and fill the churches with Mozart. In Italy, Rimini Moretti would reload for the next Liga season. Martina Barrova would build something beautiful. *If you see me, you see me, she said. I will be here.*

Imbo leans back on the dock. Before him, everything becomes clear.

"Can you see it?" Carmine asks.

"Yes," says Imbo, looking out into the wild white-capped Adriatic. "I can."