

On the Train to Slovenia

By Kelley Rossier

I sit on the quiet, empty train car, drink a small cup of espresso offered to me by a train attendant and stare out the window. I begin moving into a world of memory, though it is new to me. The world I am about to enter, this place called Slovenia, was a memory of Jay's, a memory called Yugoslavia. He lived for a year in a city called Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, a city of poets, and I picture a place where he sat in churches and dreamt about a girl he loved who didn't love him back. She had red hair and freckles like I did, but I was only ten back then, back then when my husband was seventeen, writing poems and in love with the Celtic-looking Slovenian girl.

As I sit on the train, I anticipate a movement forward into my altered life, a life without Jay and a movement backward into a time and place where he loved and breathed and anticipated what his life would be. In this place called Slovenia, maybe my foot will fall upon a sidewalk where he stood, gazing at the road before him, wondering if someday a girl would love him back.

"Koroška Bela," says the sign when the train enters Slovenia. And then I see it. I see what Jay saw, what he loved, what made him a poet. The romantic outlines of an unkempt abandoned shed, a wild meadow full of plants that do as they please, so different from the stark, clean orderly lines of Austria. I see the hardened world of steel spread across a valley of worn-out ash trees in the undergrowth of the Karavanke Mountain Range, desolate and alluring at once.

Rail station after rail station. I think of our first date. He asked me if I liked borscht. I said yes and he brought some to my post-divorce, single-mom apartment over a soap shop in Vermont, my daughters away for the weekend. He smiled and impressed me with some Slovene words he had learned long ago and we watched "Doctor Živago" in its entirety. After hours of lonely frozen Russia, I put my head on his shoulder. That was the night he told me about the red-haired girl and his life in Yugoslavia. I wished that I had been that girl, that I had known him when we were young.

"I would have loved you," I said.

And then, I did.

I have left my bedroom. Ivo Andric's *The Bridge On the Drina* sits on our bedside table at home, the last book Jay was reading. His glasses on top of it. But I have traveled far from our bed, far from our life. The train pulls into Ljubljana and I walk to the center of the city, to a statue erected in honor of the national poet, Preseren. I stand in the shimmered linden tree shade, eclipsing reason, pushing me forward. The mantra in my head: *Where are you? Where are you?*

I imagine myself curled up into him, walking the streets of a literary city, trying to catch his breath in the hot air of summer. The light, obscured but present, moves across the sky over the Tromostovje Bridge. A piece of Jay's past and my future, together. Like the train through the Alps, which jerks us back a little each time it starts to go, before we can move forward.