The Historian

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Extract

A Note to the Reader

The story that follows is one I never intended to commit to paper. Recently, however, a shock of sorts has prompted me to look back over the most troubling episodes of my life and of the lives of the several people I loved best. This is the story of how as a girl of sixteen I went in search of my father and his past, and of how he went in search of his beloved mentor and his mentor's own history, and of how we all found ourselves on one of the darkest pathways into history. It is the story of who survived that search and who did not, and why. As a historian, I have learned that, in fact, not everyone who reaches back into history can survive it. And it is not only reaching back that endangers us; sometimes history itself reaches inexorably forward for us with its shadowy claw.

In the thirty-six years since these events transpired, my life has been relatively quiet. I have devoted my time to research and uneventful travel, to my students and friends, to the writing of books of a historical and mainly impersonal nature, and to the affairs of the university in which I have ultimately taken shelter. In reviewing the past, I've been fortunate in having access to most of the personal documents in question, because they have been in my possession for many years. Where I felt it appropriate, I've stitched them together to make a continuous narrative, which I

have occasionally had to supplement from my own reminiscences. Although I have presented my father's first stories to me as they were told aloud, I've also drawn heavily on his letters, some of which duplicated his oral accounts.

In addition to reproducing these sources almost in their entirety, I've tried every possible avenue of recollection and research, sometimes revisiting a place in order to brighten the faded areas of my memory. One of the greatest pleasures of this undertaking has been the interviews — in some cases, the correspondences — I have conducted with the few remaining scholars who were involved in the events related here. Their memories have provided an invaluable supplement to my other sources. My text has also benefited from consultations with younger scholars in several fields.

There is a final resource to which I've resorted when necessary — the imagination. I have done this with judicious care, imagining for my reader only what I already know is very likely, and even then only when an informed speculation can set these documents into their proper context. Where I have been unable to explain events or motives, I have left them unexplained, out of respect for their hidden realities. The more distant history within this story I have researched as carefully as I would any academic text. The glimpses of religious and territorial conflict between an Islamic East and a Judeo-Christian West will be painfully familiar to a modern reader.

It would be difficult for me to adequately thank all those who have helped me with this project, but I would like to name at least a few. My profound gratitude goes to the following, among many others: Dr. Radu Georgescu of the University of Bucharest's Archaeological Museum, Dr. Ivanka Lazarova of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Dr. Petar Stoichev of the University of Michigan, the tireless staff of the British Library, the librarians at the Rutherford Literary Museum and Library of Philadelphia, Father Vasil of Zographou Monastery on Mount Athos, and Dr. Turgut Bora of Istanbul University.

My great hope in making this story public is that it may find at least one reader who will understand it for what it actually is: a cri de coeur. To you, perceptive reader, I bequeath my history.

Oxford, England
January 15, 2008

Part One

How these papers have been placed in sequence will be made manifest in the reading of them. All needless matters have been eliminated, so that a history almost at variance with the possibilities of later-day belief may stand forth as simple fact. There is throughout no statement of past things wherein memory may err, for all the records chosen are exactly contemporary, given from the stand-points and within the range of knowledge of those who made them.

— Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, 1897

Chapter 1

In 1972 I was sixteen — young, my father said, to be traveling with him on his diplomatic missions. He preferred to know that I was sitting attentively in class at the International School of Amsterdam; in those days his foundation was based in Amsterdam, and it had been my home for so long that I had nearly forgotten our early life in the United States. It seems peculiar to me now that I should have been so obedient well into my teens, while the rest of my generation was experimenting with drugs and protesting the imperialist war in Vietnam, but I had been raised in a world so sheltered that it makes my adult life in academia look positively adventurous. To begin with, I was motherless, and the care that my father took of me had been deepened by a double sense of responsibility, so that he protected me more completely than he might have otherwise. My mother had died when I was a baby, before my father founded the Center for Peace and Democracy. My father never spoke of her and turned quietly away if I asked questions; I understood very young that this was a topic too painful for him to discuss. Instead, he took excellent care of me himself and provided me with a series of governesses and housekeepers — money was not an object with him where my upbringing was concerned, although we lived simply enough from day to day.

The latest of these housekeepers was Mrs. Clay, who took care of our narrow seventeenth-century town house on the Raamgracht, a canal in the heart of the old city. Mrs. Clay let me in after school every day and was a surrogate parent when my

father traveled, which was often. She was English, older than my mother would have been, skilled with a feather duster and clumsy with teenagers; sometimes, looking at her too-compassionate, long-toothed face over the dining table, I felt she must be thinking of my mother and I hated her for it. When my father was away, the handsome house echoed. No one could help me with my algebra, no one admired my new coat or told me to come here and give him a hug, or expressed shock over how tall I had grown. When my father returned from some name on the European map that hung on the wall in our dining room, he smelled like other times and places, spicy and tired. We took our vacations in Paris or Rome, diligently studying the landmarks my father thought I should see, but I longed for those other places he disappeared to, those strange old places I had never been.

While he was gone, I went back and forth to school, dropping my books on the polished hall table with a bang. Neither Mrs. Clay nor my father let me go out in the evenings, except to the occasional carefully approved movie with carefully approved friends, and — to my retrospective astonishment — I never flouted these rules. I preferred solitude anyway; it was the medium in which I had been raised, in which I swam comfortably. I excelled at my studies but not in my social life. Girls my age terrified me, especially the tough-talking, chain-smoking sophisticates of our diplomatic circle — around them I always felt that my dress was too long, or too short, or that I should have been wearing something else entirely. Boys mystified me, although I dreamed vaguely of men. In fact, I was happiest alone in my father's library, a large, fine room on the first floor of our house.

My father's library had probably once been a sitting room, but he sat down only to read, and he considered a large library more important than a large living room. He had long since given me free run of his collection. During his absences, I spent hours doing my homework at the mahogany desk or browsing the shelves that lined every wall. I understood later that my father

had either half forgotten what was on one of the top shelves or — more likely — assumed I would never be able to reach it; late one night I took down not only a translation of the *Kama Sutra* but also a much older volume and an envelope of yellowing papers.

I can't say even now what made me pull them down. But the image I saw at the center of the book, the smell of age that rose from it, and my discovery that the papers were personal letters all caught my attention forcibly. I knew I shouldn't examine my father's private papers, or anyone's, and I was also afraid that Mrs. Clay might suddenly come in to dust the dustless desk — that must have been what made me look over my shoulder at the door. But I couldn't help reading the first paragraph of the topmost letter, holding it for a couple of minutes as I stood near the shelves.

December 12, 1930
Trinity College, Oxford

My dear and unfortunate successor:

It is with regret that I imagine you, whoever you are, reading the account I must put down here. The regret is partly for myself — because I will surely be at least in trouble, maybe dead, or perhaps worse, if this is in your hands. But my regret is also for you, my yet-unknown friend, because only by someone who needs such vile information will this letter someday be read. If you are not my successor in some other sense, you will soon be my heir — and I feel sorrow at bequeathing to another human being my own, perhaps unbelievable, experience of evil. Why I myself inherited it I don't know, but I hope to discover that fact, eventually — perhaps in the course of writing to you or perhaps in the course of further events.

At this point, my sense of guilt — and something else, too — made me put the letter hastily back in its envelope, but I thought about it all that day and all the next. When my father returned from his latest trip, I looked for an opportunity to ask him about

the letters and the strange book. I waited for him to be free, for us to be alone, but he was very busy in those days, and something about what I had found made me hesitate to approach him. Finally I asked him to take me on his next trip. It was the first time I had kept a secret from him and the first time I had ever insisted on anything.

Reluctantly, my father agreed. He talked with my teachers and with Mrs. Clay, and reminded me that there would be ample time for my homework while he was in meetings. I wasn't surprised; for a diplomat's child there was always waiting to be done. I packed my navy suitcase, taking my schoolbooks and too many pairs of clean kneesocks. Instead of leaving the house for school that morning, I departed with my father, walking silently and gladly beside him toward the station. A train carried us to Vienna; my father hated planes, which he said took the travel out of traveling. There we spent one short night in a hotel. Another train took us through the Alps, past all the white-and-blue heights of our map at home. Outside a dusty yellow station, my father started up our rented car, and I held my breath until we turned in at the gates of a city he had described to me so many times that I could already see it in my dreams.

Autumn comes early to the foot of the Slovenian Alps. Even before September, the abundant harvests are followed by a sudden, poignant rain that lasts for days and brings down leaves in the lanes of the villages. Now, in my fifties, I find myself wandering that direction every few years, reliving my first glimpse of the Slovenian countryside. This is old country. Every autumn mellows it a little more, *in aeternum,* each beginning with the same three colors: a green landscape, two or three yellow leaves falling through a gray afternoon. I suppose the Romans — who left their walls here and their gargantuan arenas to the west, on the coast — saw the same autumn and gave the same shiver. When my father's car swung through the gates of the oldest of Julian cities, I hugged myself. For the first time, I had been struck by the excitement of the traveler who looks history in her subtle face.

* * *

Because this city is where my story starts, I'll call it Emona, its Roman name, to shield it a little from the sort of tourist who follows doom around with a guidebook. Emona was built on Bronze Age pilings along a river now lined with art-nouveau architecture. During the next day or two, we would walk past the mayor's mansion, past seventeenth-century town houses trimmed with silver fleurs-de-lis, past the solid golden back of a great market building, its steps leading down to the surface of the water from heavily barred old doors. For centuries, river cargo had been hoisted up at that place to feed the town. And where primitive huts had once proliferated on the shore, sycamores — the European plane tree — now grew to an immense girth above the river walls and dropped curls of bark into the current.

Near the market, the city's main square spread out under the heavy sky. Emona, like her sisters to the south, showed flourishes of a chameleon past: Viennese Deco along the skyline, great red churches from the Renaissance of its Slavic-speaking Catholics, hunched brown medieval chapels with the British Isles in their features. (Saint Patrick sent missionaries to this region, bringing the new creed full circle, back to its Mediterranean origins, so that the city claims one of the oldest Christian histories in Europe.) Here and there an Ottoman element flared in doorways or in a pointed window frame. Next to the market grounds, one little Austrian church sounded its bells for the evening mass. Men and women in blue cotton work coats were moving toward home at the end of the socialist workday, holding umbrellas over their packages. As my father and I drove into the heart of Emona, we crossed the river on a fine old bridge, guarded at each end by green-skinned bronze dragons.

"There's the castle," my father said, slowing at the edge of the square and pointing up through a wash of rain. "I know you'll want to see that."

I did want to. I stretched and craned until I caught sight of the

castle through sodden tree branches — moth-eaten brown towers on a steep hill at the town's center.

"Fourteenth century," my father mused. "Or thirteenth? I'm not good with these medieval ruins, not down to the exact century. But we'll look in the guidebook."

"Can we walk up there and explore it?"

"We can find out about it after my meetings tomorrow. Those towers don't look as if they'd hold a bird up safely, but you never know."

He pulled the car into a parking space near the town hall and helped me out of the passenger side, gallantly, his hand bony in its leather glove. "It's a little early to check in at the hotel. Would you like some hot tea? Or we could get a snack at that *gastronomia.* It's raining harder," he added doubtfully, looking at my wool jacket and skirt. I quickly got out the hooded waterproof cape he'd brought me from England the year before. The train trip from Vienna had taken nearly a day and I was hungry again, in spite of our lunch in the dining car.

But it was not the *gastronomia,* with its red and blue interior lights gleaming through one dingy window, its waitresses in their navy platform sandals — doubtless — and its sullen picture of Comrade Tito, that snared us. As we picked our way through the wet crowd, my father suddenly darted forward. "Here!" I followed at a run, my hood flapping, almost blinding me. He had found the entrance to an art-nouveau teahouse, a great scrolled window with storks wading across it, bronze doors in the form of a hundred water-lily stems. The doors closed heavily behind us and the rain faded to a mist, mere steam on the windows, seen through those silver birds as a blur of water. "Amazing this survived the last thirty years." My father was peeling off his London Fog. "Socialism's not always so kind to its treasures."

At a table near the window we drank tea with lemon, scalding through the thick cups, and ate our way through sardines on buttered white bread and even a few slices of *torta.* "We'd better stop there," my father said. I had lately come to dislike the way he blew

on his tea over and over to cool it, and to dread the inevitable moment when he said we should stop eating, stop doing whatever was enjoyable, save room for dinner. Looking at him in his neat tweed jacket and turtleneck, I felt he had denied himself every adventure in life except diplomacy, which consumed him. He would have been happier living a little, I thought; with him, everything was so serious.

But I was silent, because I knew he hated my criticism, and I had something to ask. I had to let him finish his tea first, so I leaned back in my chair, just far enough so that my father couldn't tell me to please not slump. Through the s[illegible]er-mottled window I could see a wet city, gloomy in the deepening afternoon, and people passing in a rush through horizontal rain. The teahouse, which should have been filled with ladies in long straight gowns of ivory gauze, or gentlemen in pointed beards and velvet coat collars, was empty.

"I hadn't realized how much the driving had worn me out." My father set his cup down and pointed to the castle, just visible through the rain. "That's the direction we came from, the other side of that hill. We'll be able to see the Alps from the top."

I remembered the white-shouldered mountains and felt they breathed over this town. We were alone together on their far side, now. I hesitated, took a breath. "Would you tell me a story?" Stories were one of the comforts my father had always offered his motherless child; some of them he drew from his own pleasant childhood in Boston, and some from his more exotic travels. Some he invented for me on the spot, but I'd recently grown tired of those, finding them less astonishing than I'd once thought.

"A story about the Alps?"

"No." I felt an inexplicable surge of fear. "I found something I wanted to ask you about."

He turned and looked mildly at me, graying eyebrows raised above his gray eyes.

"It was in your library," I said. "I'm sorry — I was poking

around and I found some papers and a book. I didn't look — much — at the papers. I thought —"

"A book?" Still he was mild, checking his cup for a last drop of tea, only half listening.

"They looked — the book was very old, with a dragon printed in the middle."

He sat forward, sat very still, then shivered visibly. This strange gesture alerted me at once. If a story came, it wouldn't be like any story he'd ever told me. He glanced at me, under his eyebrows, and I was surprised to see how drawn and sad he looked.

"Are you angry?" I was looking into my cup now, too.

"No, darling." He sighed deeply, a sound almost grief stricken. The small blonde waitress refilled our cups and left us alone again, and still he had a hard time getting started.