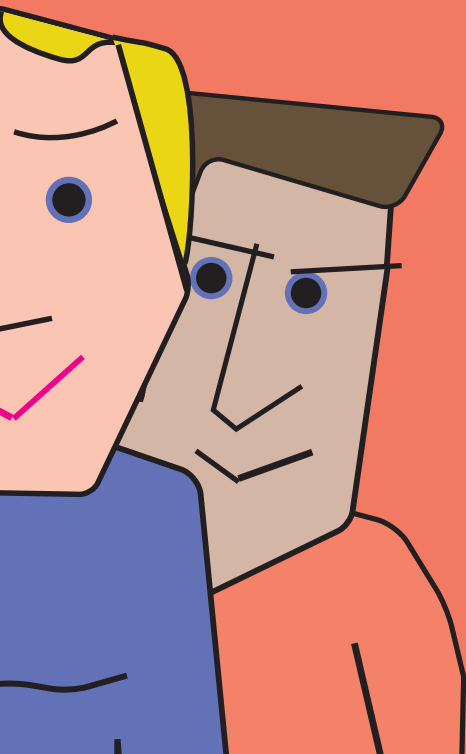


The Tribulations Of Sofie And Carlo

by
James Eno



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Of
Sofie And Carlo

by
James Eno

with illustrations
by
Stefan Loeckx



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Graphic Design and Cartoons

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*To all the 'Sofies' and 'Carlos' I have worked with at EFA.
They discovered learning curves that were as bumpy
as they were steep*



EFA Introduction

“Somewhere in Europe a festival is underway.
Every day brings a crisis.
Somehow the big people in charge only ever arrive at the
end. Only the two young interns, Sofie and Carlo, stand
between triumph and disaster.”

This is how Sofie and Carlo were presented in our
regular mailings to the festivals and broader community
throughout the past years in 3 seasons (including a special
corona virus season).

In anecdotal stories, writer James Eno and cartoonist
Stefan Loeckx illustrate the ins and outs of festival making
from the perspective of two trainees that could be in the
office of any festival: two protagonists allow us in these
fictional stories to look behind the scenes of every day
festival making, to visit the ‘common’ places with the idea:
‘ah, we know this feeling’ or, ‘ah ja, I remember this kind of
story’.

Worth a read, worth a laugh: Enjoy the lecture now on
paper.

Kathrin Deventer
European Festivals Association

Author's Note

These stories (vignette scenes rather than a continuous narrative) began in complicated but normal times, when festivals were flourishing and had their plans in place for years to come. Even at the close of the summer season there was no sense that the following one would be any different. By the end of winter all that had changed and the world had come to a halt as a pandemic raged. The show must go on though, and festivals found a way. Indoor became outdoor, big became small, behind closed doors became online. If the show went on, therefore, the festival needed its interns and the interns needed jobs in a way they never thought they would.

Most of us who have spent our lives around arts festivals will have learned our trade by starting as the junior who has to solve all the things those who are paid more do not want to have to deal with. Adapt and survive. Sofie and Carlo are present day examples of bright young things who have served festivals as long as they have existed. They will always be necessary, never fully appreciated. Just because they are in the same generation and are thrown together in a foreign land does not mean they will love each other. Sofie and Carlo agree on the tiresomeness of the adults they encounter but find each other irritating beyond reason. For all that, they endure and share their triumphs while taking delight in each other's disasters. I have come to be very fond of both of them. As for Oxana - she is all too familiar.

Achile Djurekschyk first appeared live at EFA's Lisbon Summit in 2018, played by the wonderful actor Jorge Andrade. He learned the script in a day and we had one short rehearsal for his explanation (on the next page). There was a delicious moment when Sir Jonathan Mills, finishing his own speech, looked on in utter bafflement, not realising this is fiction. Maybe it is not - quite.

James Eno

The Festival Director Explains

I've been in this business - a Director of festivals, some of the greatest - for many years. But not as many as some might think. Count my wrinkles. They are like the rings of a tree trunk. One wrinkle for every festival completed.

There are festivals and festivals. Sometimes the wrinkle is just a little kink. Sometimes a deep furrow. This year I think it will be a trench – the sort of wrinkle under my eyes that archaeologists will find and then speculate about the wars that caused it.

I have an excellent and dedicated staff, don't get me wrong. They know how things should go. Tickets are selling OK – not the best ever, I have to admit. My 7 performances of *Waldo The Necromancer*, a story of 5th century Vikings in Arabia, with Swahili libretto and set to music for electric percussion and five countertenors by Costas Pimpelbaum, is not attracting the crowd I'd hoped for.

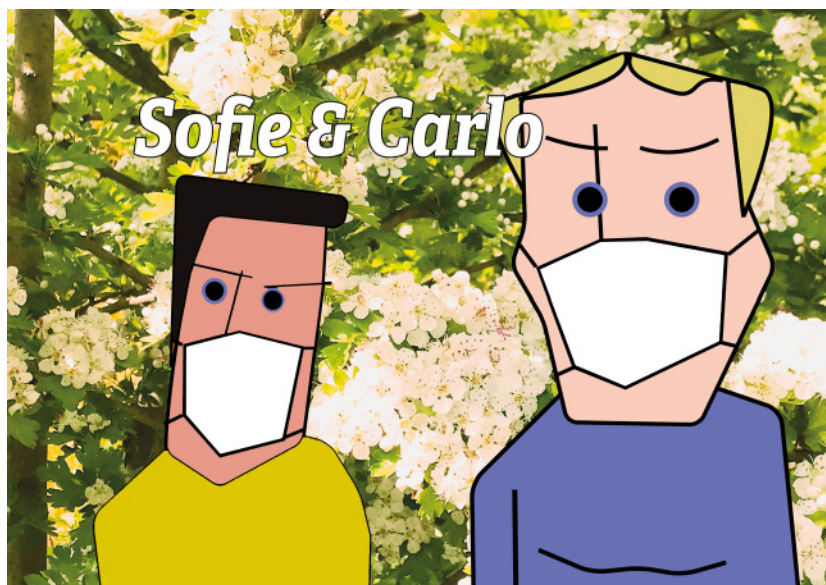
But we will get there. We always do. And at last we can be found easily on line. The new Festivalfinder search engine is already bringing us fresh audiences. Some are a little unexpected. Today there is the lady from Alabama who found us via the site and has bought a ticket for just one concert.

She insists that we provide crèche facilities not only for her toddler but for her three poodles and a pet mongoose. Do they all bite? Is this fair? Is this reasonable?

Dare I say no? If I do, will she sue me for canine discrimination? If it were a cat, would twitter be full of complaints on #Meowtoo? But if I say yes, what about the insurance?

I need more staff. Desperately. Dealing with such abominations is not in the job descriptions of any of my colleagues. They are all very clear. And there are so many little challenges like this these days that in the past we would have shrugged and said, it goes with the territory. Festival extra duties. Not with contracts these days. Extra duties have to be defined, not just assigned.

I need someone to be a mop and bucket, a dustpan and brush, a tissue and hanky? I've explained all this to Oxana, my fierce head of administration, my very general manager. I've told her I'm near to breaking point. My nerves are shot and we open next week. All live-streamed, every event sent to the European Broadcasting Union.



She told me to grow up. Be my age, get a grip. I told her I feel 250 and I'm gripping on to anything that will hold me. Now, after I've been biting my nails for days, she says she has the answer.

Interns. INTERNS! I ask you!

Of course I accepted.

She has it in hand already and thanks to EFA she's talked to friends in Estonia and Italy and found me Sofie and Carlo. They come highly recommended which, knowing Oxana's lies to me over the years, probably means they've never even been to any sort of festival, never mind worked in one.

Maybe they'll be my salvation. Maybe I hate them already. I think I need a drink.

Achile Djurekschyk
Artistic Director

Somewhere in Europe a festival is underway. Every day brings a crisis. Somehow the big people in charge only ever arrive at the end. Only the two young interns, Sofie and Carlo, stand between triumph and disaster.

Part I

The Normal Festival

Expectations Lowered

Sofie examined Carlo from top to bottom, or as much of the bottom as was not hidden by his desk, and then back up again. Only once her assessment was complete did she lean over from her side and offer a hand to shake.

“Hi.”

Carlo looked up as she spoke and pretended to be surprised, a trifle confused. In fact he had completed his own assessment of her within a millisecond of her walking through the door but had no intention of admitting it. Tough, he had thought, noting the firm set of her jaw, the stern cut of the mouth; Northern and a bit stringy for his Southern taste but could be worse.

“Buon giorno,” he grasped her hand, smiling and half rising from his seat. “Carlo.”

“Sofie,” she announced, completing her judgement of Carlo. Typical Italian; silly black hair, worn a bit too long for these days, stupidly expensive black t-shirt. It was just a black t-shirt for heavens sake! He probably smoked, she decided on no evidence, and would show off by being really patronising.

There was no need for instant small talk. Sofie opened the lid of her standard issue festival laptop and switched on. Once the prompt came up she typed in the password she’d been given. They could have come up with something more original and secure than Sofie1, she thought. No secrets here, then.

“Have you met the Director yet?” asked Carlo cheerfully.

Sofie shrugged, waiting for a browser to load. “No, only the...”

"Fierce Oxana," completed Carlo, "and you're still here!"

"Fierce? She was very nice to me."

"Si? Well, you're new."

"Aren't you?"

"Three days," Carlo announced as if it was a record endurance test.

"Wow!"

"I know. Amazing," he preened.

"What is?" enquired a voice behind him.

Carlo turned and smiled up at the squat figure with heavy jewellery and hair an industrial shade of bronzed orange. "That Sofie is here, I have a partner now," he lied fluently.

Oxana sniffed. "Before you are too overcome, Carlo, you can take her over to the hall."

"Show her around?"

"In a way. We have a situation developing." Both her interns looked up expectantly, looking forward to a taste of orchestral management, sorting out a fight between the double-bass players, hunting for the conductor's lost score of a great Mahler symphony. Their hopes soon faded. "Some mother has dropped her little beasts off for the Classical Darlings concert,"

"But that's tomorrow," Carlo pointed out.

Oxana patted his shoulder. "Precisely. You know that, I know that, but the mother did not. You have a six and an eight year old – boy and girl in that order – to entertain for the next four hours. By the end of that you should know each other very well." She swept out, calling, "off you go," over her shoulder.



Orchestral Interlude

Sofie sighed, brusquely pushed a loose strand of blonde hair out of her right eye, and glared across the desk at the grinning Carlo. "I suppose you thought it was funny!"

Funny was becoming a dangerous word between them. Sofie was blonde Estonian, Carlo was all dark Venetian. The only thing they had in common was coming from the cold end of long seas. Carlo doubted whether Sofie ever found anything funny. Sofie saw her fellow intern as merely silly, not to mention vain, childish and probably sexist beyond hope.

They had been across the desk from each other for a week, persuaded by contacts in each of their home countries that they should spend the first six months after leaving university working in one of Europe's leading arts festivals. Just about the only thing they agreed on so far was that if this one was a 'leading' festival, they dreaded to think what the rest were like.

For a start the Director... well, that was the problem. The festival had started the evening before but the Director hadn't. He was nowhere to be found.

"You laughed. I saw you," taunted Carlo.

"I did not! I was really sorry for him. It was not his fault."

"Of course it was," Carlo scoffed.

"How?" Sofie asked, exasperated. The venerable Director had been extremely nice to her since she had accepted his invitation to 'shadow' him during her first few days. If truth be told she had a soft spot for him – and felt just a touch guilty. If she had been shadowing him a little more closely, the disaster might never have happened.

"What idiot gets himself locked in an orchestra lorry?"

The answer was a festival director who had an obsession with checking every detail himself and had been convinced, just before the morning's final rehearsal, that the stage was one glockenspiel short of a percussion section. It was not.

As he had poked among the piles of protective blankets, the doors of the lorry had been closed, the driver had parked safely out of the way in a distant truck park and headed to

the band's hotel, confident he would not be needed till late that night, after the concert.

The AD had the torch on his phone to help but the battery was low. He used it to find a space to sit without the timpani, varieties of cymbal, side drums and xylophone not needed for that evening's repertoire. After that he was in the dark. For a while he banged on the lorry's side and shouted but nobody responded. As evening turned to night his cries became ever more plaintive. He was desperately thirsty and then just desperate.

"You found him eventually," Carlo pointed out.

That was true, Sofie acknowledged, but she was not sure it made her feel better. After 14 hours in dark solitary confinement, on what should have been a day of triumph, the no longer fragrant and assured Director had been led away gibbering.



Clash Of Personalities

"I've been thinking," Carlo announced, gazing at Sofie with furrowed brow, "and before you tell me it's a waste of time for me to even try, I'm being serious."

Sofie sighed. "If you say so." When Carlo became serious she knew something dramatic was coming, though she couldn't think what. So far it had been an uneventful Thursday afternoon in the festival office.

The Director was still recovering at home with a nurse from his experience of being locked in an orchestra lorry. So far the General Manager, fierce Oxana, had not shouted at them once, though she had curled her sarcastic lip a few times.

"What I don't understand," Carlo went on, peering at the schedule spread across his computer screen, "is how we can be staging *Waiting For Godot* at the same time as the last act of *Tosca*."

"Why not?"

"Because *Tosca* jumping off the castle will land on Es-
tragon."

"Idiot," laughed Sofie. "They're not in the same theatre."

He looked up. "Oh yes they are. Malibran Stage. Tomorrow afternoon. Tosca finishes herself off at 18.25. Godot is being Waited For there from 18.00. That's what the production sheet says."

"It can't be right." Sofie came round to see for herself. She hated to admit it but Carlo had a point.

It was a point they both made to Thelma, the Stage Manager, to Christof, the Head of Production, and finally, with a hint of despair, to fierce Oxana herself. The reaction was the same each time. "Oh that's just a misprint. Don't worry."

Which is why, at 17.45 on the Friday evening, the world's first ever riot between the supporters of Verdi and those of Becket developed.

In the stalls of the festival's grandest venue, tickets were waved in anger, mints and caramels were thrown, and one man (a Tosca lover who had unwisely told an incoming young Godotist that she could sit on his knee) was knocked senseless with a bottle of Aperol. Becket would have loved it.

Sofie stood at the back of a balcony box, her face a mask of horror. Next to her Carlo grinned, aimed the camera of his phone, and streamed the brawl on YouTube. The international notoriety would be worth far more than the shame. Best of all was Oxana's face as Carlo cheerily wished her good night.

Estragon was safe, of course. Tosca jumped the other way.



Plastic Disgrace

In the Friends of the Festival Hospitality Room Mm. Hortense Duchamp was having a meltdown. And when Hortense *Cherie* had a meltdown M. Michel Duchamp had a meltdown too. After all, they owned this festival – or thought they did.

Their meltdowns were regular. At least two per festival. What they lacked in spontaneity, though, they made up for

in oomph. The causes were varied and many.

This evening's little eruption (oh, well – let's do Hortense credit – major blow-up) was plastic. Given the noise she was making, one might have thought a pyroclastic flow of Pompeii engulfing proportions was on its way.

In fact the plastic in dispute was the vessel that held her sad portion of *crémant*. The quality of the wine was not the problem (though had Mm. Duchamp possessed the sophistication she claimed, it should have been; the festival fizz could clean the barnacles off a ship's bottom). The problem was that it was *in* plastic, not glass.

Hortense ranted at Michel. Michel fetched the student holding the bottle. The Friends' Room Supervisor called The Office. The Office summoned Sofie because, naturally, no-one more senior was available or could face another Duchamp encounter. Sofie had never had one.

"Who are you?" M. Duchamp demanded. Sofie explained. Duchamp grunted. Hortense glared. "You're new." Sofie admitted it.

"I – we – have been at the heart of this festival for over thirty years, young lady, and I have - my wife has - never been so disgusted." This was a straight lie. Hortense Duchamp was so disgusted at least twice a day.

"Plastic for *crémant*!" she spluttered. "Imagine! The indignity."

"Really," reinforced her husband, mollified a little by Sofie's youth and good looks (an unwise move, as he would find out on the way home), "would you serve *crémant* in plastic in your home?"

Sofie wanted to reply that if she could afford *crémant* at all she'd be happy to drink it out of anything, including the bottle, but instead just muttered, "I'll see what I can do," and consulted the barman.

She returned without a solution, at least not one that would find favour. "The reason, Madame, is that safety regulations have changed since last year and we cannot let patrons take glass into the hall, and we know you like to continue to have wine during the music. Plastic glasses seemed the best answer."

"Really!" exclaimed the madame, "what rot."

At that moment Carlo, keen not to miss Sofie in trouble,

appeared at her side. "Maybe I can help?"

"I doubt it," Sophie sighed.

Carlo listened as M. Duchamp recapitulated the complaint, then hustled to the bar. He came back with an enormous pair of wine glasses (real ones) filled to the brim.

"If Madame and Monsieur are prepared to change seats, then you could follow me to the President's box where such rules do not apply."

Hortense looked at the size of the glasses being proffered and the volcano subsided. "Oh well, I suppose..."

Later, once the music had started and they were back in the office, Sofie grudgingly admitted Carlo had been inspired.

"And they'll be no trouble in the interval," he assured her. "I gave them a pair of Royal Russians."

"What's that?"

"A lot of vodka underneath the fake champagne."



How To Placate Tenors

"The tenor is whining," Sofie grimaced as she hung up the phone.

"So what's new? Isn't that what tenors always do, especially when they're singing?" pointed out Carlo with a shrug.

"So I've been told," admitted Sofie. In truth she had not been in the festival world long enough to have dealt with enough tenors to judge. "But this one is whining at me."

"Can't think why." The sarcasm dripped out of Carlo.

Sofie sighed and reached for her coffee. It was ten in the morning and she was not ready for either sarcasm or whining, especially from Italians. The self-styled 'artists' she had been detailed to look after the night before had enjoyed an adrenaline rush and the drinks to go with it well into the small hours. Sofie was a mess on one sleep cycle and wine.

"He says he's lost his scarf, therefore he can't leave his hotel room. His throat will dry up."

"Good!" Then Carlo was infuriatingly logical. "If he can't leave his hotel room without his scarf then it must be still in the room – otherwise he would not have left wherever he was last. Go and help him search."

Sofie called the neurotic singer back. She made the calm suggestion but was met by a torrent of furious Italian. Shaking her head, she just handed the phone to Carlo who listened, a grin spreading across his face. When there was a pause he just said, "si Signor," and hung up.

"Well?" asked Sofie.

"You have to understand," Carlo handed her back the phone, "that every Italian man has to respond to his inner Pavarotti. But this man is our star tenor so he has to present his outer Pavarotti too. I expect his scarf is beautifully folded in a drawer next to his clean shirts but he's not going to admit it – or admit you, a young woman, to his room unless it is into his bed. If you found the scarf easily he would be mortified."

"So how are you going to get him on stage?" Sophie asked practically. She didn't need a lecture on the absurdities of masculine insecurity – and definitely not when her head felt like porridge.

"Simple. He wants us to buy him a new scarf – a better one than he has already – but he will never say so. And he will reject the first three. If one is silk, he will want wool, if wool, it should be cotton. If blue he will insist on black – and so on."

"What do we do? I'm too tired for this. Why don't we just tell the audience the truth: that he's a childish idiot?"

"Fans. We'll get the blame. Come with me. I'll buy you coffee and pills too."

An hour later the distraught tenor was still pacing his room. His scarf had nothing to do with his agitation. It was precisely where Carlo had said it was. The trouble was sheer nerves. He was convinced he could not remember a note of the music he was due to sing in the festival's early afternoon recital. And because it was a recital he could not even blame a conductor. The pianist would just have to play on his own.

There was a knock at the door. He opened it. That was his mistake. He opened it only a crack but that was enough for Carlo to insert his foot and shove.

"Signor," he bowed with a flourish once the worried tenor had retreated, "we bring you solutions, courtesy of the

festival. Please select a scarf of your choice.”

After Carlo, three immaculately turned out women paraded in, each carrying ten scarves, followed by Sofie bearing a tray of cream cakes and hot chocolate topped with Chantilly.

“How did you do it?” Oxana, the General Manager, asked her interns in genuine admiration. They were standing at the back of the hall while the tenor finished his last song without so much as a flat A sharp.

“Distraction,” admitted Carlo, “and a friend of Sofie’s who understands sale or return.”



In Case Of Fire

The rain, which had made life miserable for the hopeful hundred in the returns queue before the concert, had stopped by the interval and the audience had spilled out into the delightful courtyard of the old palace to find a balmy night and the prospect of a full moon.

Carlo sighed and leant against a pillar with a glass of sparkling water. Apart from that (an edict had come down saying junior staff were not to drink alcohol before the end of the event) he was almost as happy as at home in Italy.

Sofie was on artist baby-sitting duty – not the artists’ babies, the endlessly neurotic artists themselves – so she was not in the way for once. Carlo relaxed and contemplated the audience in the line for drinks. He had deliberately tucked his staff pass into his shirt to avoid looking available for questions.

Six sips of water later his incoming text alert beeped. Carlo’s sigh deepened. “Backstage. Now,” the text read. It was from the boss, not Sofie. He’d better do as it said.

The group that evening were a baroque ensemble, or ‘gut pluckers’ as fierce General Manager Oxana had labelled them. She liked her orchestras with steel. Sofie, who had spent years as one of the pluckers studying early music, had been scandalised, especially when the first two letters of ‘pluck’ had been substituted.

"So, where's the fire?" Carlo asked nonchalantly as he arrived in the artists' lounge.

"In there," announced Sofie, pointing to Dressing Room One.

"You're joking," Carlo grinned. Typical Sofie wind-up.

She shook her head. "No. But it's out now. The police have taken over. Oxana says you've got to go on stage and tell the audience the bad news."

"And that is?"

Sofie handed Carlo a hand-written note scribbled by Oxana on the back of the duty sheet. Carlo deciphered it. "Due to unforeseen circumstances the programme for the second half of this evening's concert has been changed. Letizia Crumpfeld will no longer be singing a selection from Cavalli and Purcell. Instead Paula Kraznowicz will lead *Il Giardino Del Bosco* in Vivaldi's Four Seasons."

"Oh dear, they won't like that." tutted Carlo, "So what happened?"

"It went like this. When they all came off-stage, the theorbo player put his long instrument down across three seats. Enter la Crumpfeld, who sat down on it hard. Exit one theorbo with snapped neck.

"Nasty."

"Very. So Roberto the theorbist tried to strangle her with the remains. She fought him off so he took his zippo lighter to her dress. Screams, consternation."

"Hot roast soprano?"

"No. I got in first with the water bottle. But she can't possibly go on again."

"...darling."

"Thanks," laughed Sofie, deliberately misinterpreting. "But you can. Off you go."



Monday Blues

For Sofie and Carlo, Monday was the best day of the week. Nothing happened. The festival was dead. All the stages were quiet, the audiences had either gone home after the weekend or they were hanging around the cafés and bars waiting for festivities to resume on Tuesday.

Some had even gone swimming. Sofie threatened to celebrate her temporary freedom and join them.

Water had a bad effect on Carlo. He appreciated the theory of it but when it came to being on it, in it, or even drinking it, he would rather not. His flatmates were not convinced he was keen on being under it either. Carlo's riposte that 'showers were for rain clouds' did not impress.

According to Oxana, the fierce boss, the festival was never dead, just resting. She tended to assert this acidly when Carlo was found not doing anything 'in particular' or she had run out of cigarettes. Carlo didn't dare use the come-back he told Sofie he had given to Oxana – that, "with all that tobacco muck in her, she'll soon be permanently resting herself."

Carlo took perverse pleasure, therefore, when Oxana told him to, "go and fish that girl out of whichever pond she's in and tell her to get back to the office, in her bikini if necessary."

"No time to change," he told her, taking the most literal version of the request. He tried to suggest that the towel was out of the question too but, wisely, Sofie ignored him. "So much for our day off," she moaned. "What's the panic?"

Her long hair was still dripping when she made it back in front of Oxana.

"No idea," The smirk was only partially wiped off Carlo's face by Oxana's glare when he and the sopping Sofie appeared. It was replaced, though, by his wail of injustice. "Why us?"

As Oxana had explained, the festival might not have performances on the Monday but it did have rehearsals. Specifically it had the get-in and tech run for a dance spectacular that included two knife throwers and two Afghan hounds, the very shaggy sort.

Sofie's worst fear – that the knife throwers had impaled the dogs and she was expected to remove the bodies – proved unfounded. They had missed. Carlo wished they hadn't. The dogs' reaction to the shouts of the knife artistes and the whistling blades had been to render the surface of the stage totally unsuitable for dance, however well sprung.

Later, as Sofie discarded the rubber gloves and rinsed off the smell of disinfectant, she decided that Carlo's childish plot had done her a favour. No clothes were made unwearable in the clean-up.



The Price Of Decorum

Steam rose from Sofie as she waited for the Great Conductor at the end of his rehearsal. The steam was not metaphorical; Sofie was not particularly angry – at least not yet. She was steaming because she had been standing in the rain on a hot day.

The Orchestra were rehearsing for their open-air gala but they were protected from the weather by a canopy that was said to be a masterpiece of architectural imagination.

Sofie was not (protected, that is – she was, of course, a masterpiece).

For the first hour of the rehearsal she had listened with rapt attention as the orchestra played Strauss, Gershwin and Bernstein just for her. It was a closed rehearsal and, while curious members of the public could observe from outside the perimeter of the festival bowl, only she, as intern on duty, could sit in row ten and soak up the warmth of sound and sun. She had felt profoundly privileged.

And then, somewhere in the middle of the Overture to *Candide*, the rain came – not the drizzle of a dull day, but in the torrents of a sudden summer storm.

When the music finished and the sun returned, Sofie steamed and her festival t-shirt clung like an Asian tourist to the guide with the umbrella.

"My dear, you should have taken shelter," said the great conductor and gallantly draped his blue linen jacket round her shoulders.

"And miss the music? I'm not cold and it's only water."

"You are very kind," said the great conductor.

"And now I am to take you to lunch."

"Once again you are kind but perhaps you should change before we eat."

"Oh, I'm not coming with you, I am just to show you to the restaurant so the Director can take over."

"Ridiculous!" the Maestro announced, "anyone who sits through a storm to watch me make music deserves to eat too. I won't allow anything else. But you must be dry."

Which is how Carlo, who had not been away from his desk all morning, found himself half naked while Sofie's t-shirt dripped from a hanger in front of the window. His taunts that she just wanted to see his chest only partly compensated for the threats she had issued if he failed to surrender his top. Carlo didn't mind too much. It was ammunition for the future.

He minded a great deal more, though, when fierce Oxana fined him half a day's pay for being improperly dressed in the office.



Exhaustion And Recovery

At the end of the evening indoor concert, towards 11pm, Sofie was ready in the Great Conductor's dressing room with the requisite glass, bottle of sparkling water, and large brandy. The GC, dripping sweat and his eyes glazed after more than an hour of Bruckner, could only nod his thanks. His mind was still in an organ loft in Linz, even if his frame was in a bare modernist dressing-room with no windows.

Sofie, herself aglow from the wonder of the sumptuous music, withdrew silently towards the door, ready to repel agents, vague friends, sponsors and autograph hunters as instructed.

"Wait," the voice of the conductor was barely a whisper. Sofie stopped and turned. "Was that OK? You haven't said anything."

"It was amazing. Wonderful."

The exhausted older man slumped into an armchair and swallowed half the cognac. "I don't know. The Scherzo. Rigid, no air, no life. Dull!"

He was almost three times her age. Sofie didn't know what to say. She trembled. "I thought it was..."

"That bad?"

Courage returned. "No! I thought it was incredible, one of the most exciting things I have ever heard. I was almost dancing."

They looked at each other in silence for a long moment. It was the sort of silence that holds an inquisition and a surrender. A sharp rap on the door broke the spell. "Shall I..?" asked Sofie.

"No, not yet. Everybody must wait." As Sophie put her hand out to open the door, he added, "but you come back in. You give me strength. So does this," he waved the glass then finished the drink. "Maybe you can ask someone to bring me a little more – and one for you, champagne perhaps?"

That's only fair, thought Sofie and nodded. Outside the door Carlo was lurking. She also saw fierce Oxana fast approaching as she relayed the errand to Carlo. He shuffled off in disgust at his menial role and the free drink Sofie was getting. Being her barman was not his ambition.

Oxana was about to barge into the dressing-room when Sofie blocked her way and explained. Not easy, pulling rank on the General Manager but to Sofie's surprise she did not insist. "Not had the second cognac yet. That figures. In you go then. Let me know when he's ready."

"Thank you," smiled the Great Conductor with all humility as Sofie closed the door. "Now it's my turn to change my shirt," he said, alluding to her t-shirt that had got soaked in the rain a couple of days earlier at rehearsal for the open air concert of Gershwin and Bernstein 'pops'. "I will take a shower then I will face those who wish me well – and those who only pretend to."

It was not a large dressing-room. The shower opened directly into it without quite enough room to undress, especially from the clobber of white tie and tails. Sofie wondered whether she was expected to watch him strip and hold the towel. It did not thrill her.

That was anticipated. "Perhaps you would sit down and

close your eyes for a moment, until you hear the water.”

While the water revived the Maestro, Carlo returned with the drinks. It seemed the bar had finished the open champagne and was not prepared to breach another. Sophie had a half bottle all to herself. Carlo refused to do the honours and shuffled out in search of a beer.

By the time the door was opened again to the outside world close to midnight, all but the most fervent admirers had melted away, Oxana and the director among them. The Maestro and Sofie were doing fine, though. The only dampener on the conductor’s night was that Carlo jumped into the front seat next to the chauffeur when Sofie was offered a lift home.



Bad Start

Sofie and Carlo arrived at the office at the same time one morning. This was a mistake. Neither wanted to see the other until caffeine was safely flowing into their bloodstream and that was usually easy enough to arrange since Sofie’s room was several streets further from the centre than Carlo’s.

But this morning Sofie was late and Carlo was early and they ended up on the same tram. Even by their standards of undeclared war, it would have been too rude to ignore each other. Sofie tried to hang back as they climbed out of the tram but Carlo was playing the gallant and was waiting for her. He even followed her into her habitual morning coffee shop, a move obviously designed to irritate.

Oxana was standing outside the main door of the office as they arrived. At first they took this as an ominous sign but then spotted the plume of smoke rising from the cigarette in her right hand and realised they were interrupting her routine as much as she was theirs.

“Right, you two. Don’t bother to go inside,” Oxana barked fiercely and took a drag on her fag.

“Good morning,” Carlo offered civilly.

Oxana exhaled smoke in reply. “I’ve got a job for you two. I need you around town – the student areas, any building

sites in the centre, vacant shops. Get up to marketing and collect a roll of posters."

"Don't tell me... fly-posting."

The remains of the cigarette was crushed underfoot. "Maybe," said Oxana with unusual coyness.

Sofie took a sip of her coffee through the plastic top, just enough to make talking bearable at that time of the morning. "What's the poster for?"

"That stupid new opera of ours, the Director's inspired commission."

"Not selling well?" Carlo raised an innocent eyebrow.

"Of course it's not selling well," If she hadn't been lighting another cigarette Oxana would probably have spat. "It's barely selling at all. 15% if we're lucky."

"Is it going to be bad?" asked Sofie.

Oxana fixed her with a gimlet eye. "How the hell should I know but I wouldn't buy a ticket to watch five countertenors wail against percussion in Swahili, telling us we should care about *Waldo the Necromancer*, even if it is by Costas Pimpelbaum."

"Or maybe *because* it's by Pimpelbaum," murmured Sofie, who knew about such things.

"Fly-posting is illegal, especially illegal in daylight," Carlo pointed out. "Or have you cleared it with the mayor so we won't be arrested? It would not look good on my CV – convicted of criminal damage in my first job. I might want to go to America sometime."

Oxana glared at her Italian intern, silent for a moment while she pulled the smoke and nicotine deep into her lungs. She waited till she had expelled it and flicked the ash onto the pavement before speaking. She had expected Carlo to buckle under the stare but he merely joined Sofie in taking a swig of coffee. "Are you refusing?"

Carlo looked across to Sofie. She seemed to be studying the joins in the pavement. Without lifting her eyes she said, "Yes, I think we are. You can't tell us to break the law, even a small one."

Oxana trod on her second cigarette and strode inside to her office. She would have her revenge later.

"Going to be a fun day, then," observed Carlo as he and Sofie followed her.



Waldo's Salvation

Waldo was becoming a headache. He might have been a legendary necromancer somewhere in the 5th century but his wonders were looking distinctly rusty in the early 21st. It was hardly Waldo's fault. His appeal had been severely curtailed by the decision of composer Costas Pimpelbaum that all the main characters should be sung by countertenors and that they should act out the story in Swahili.

Quite why Swahili very few could answer. Pimpelbaum's explanation, that Africa was too often left out of opera, did not convince. People started humming chunks of *Aida*. The truth, which was that Pimpelbaum had got muddled between Swahili and Waldo's actual language of Farsi, was not something he was ever going to admit. Not that it would have mattered a lot – Persian might have been authentic but it didn't sound much better by the time Pimpelbaum and the countertenors had finished with it.

Word had leaked from rehearsals (whether from the technical side, the instrumentalists or the disgruntled high-faluting singers themselves was not clear) and the word was that all was not well.

That at least was the euphemistic version. The real words used would have made the great necromancer himself blush. And they spread far beyond the confines of the rehearsal room and the bars musicians frequented.

The result was predictable. Tickets sales, never exactly a torrent, dried to a trickle. Pimpelbaum was oblivious, pointing out that some of his greatest works had first been heard by an audience of three, including himself and his partner (undefined).

The Festival Director was beside himself with anxiety, though, and General Manager Oxana was beside him too, fiercely pointing out what the year's budget would look like with a hole of €150000. Her implication was that this was an artistic decision and the body of the Director therefore would fit neatly into such a hole, without a ladder.

Carlo and Sofie felt the tension rise in the office as the day of the premiere approached. Sofie was worried. She did not want her CV to include working her first internship at a

festival that became known for artistic ineptitude.

"Nah," said Carlo, "We'll be OK. Just hang around and watch the fun."

"What fun?" Sofie sniffed.

"The fun that will soon be created. This show's going to sell out."

The look Carlo had back from Sofie was full of wariness of the plainly insane. "And I'm going to marry you and have ten children. I doubt it."

There was mischief in Carlo's smile as he said, "So do I but, you know, fate will decide."

"So, thanks to you, *Waldo* will be a smash?"

"Partly, but partly thanks to that famous anarchist Tweet Delete. Watch and learn."

Late that afternoon Sofie was aware that her Facebook feed was going mad as she was asked by friends at home in Estonia whether 'she was anything to do with that mad opera' and guiding her to a news story.

Male Sopranos Revolting Over Nude

Dancing Scene In Ancient Tomb,

(the headline ran)

Festival In Uproar.

"Are they really?" Sofie asked Carlo.

"Revolting – I expect so, but is there a nude dancing scene in an ancient tomb? Not yet but there may be soon."

The next morning the two interns were waylaid by Oxana before they reached their desks, her face alight with happiness. "It's quite extraordinary," she began. "the first three performances of *Waldo* have nearly sold out. And all because of one wrong internet tweet."

Carlo shook his head in fake amazement. "Never underestimate the power of a social media scandal. What about the 'male sopranos'?"

Oxana shrugged. "They don't care. They are not going to be doing the dancing."

Carlo raised an eyebrow at Sofie. She giggled, "and no, and none of the ten children either."



Train Strains

The train was late. Sofie, who was not really used to trains since she hardly ever used them in Estonia, sat in the station bar and wondered how many glass cups of tea would arrive before the violinist from the Balkans she had been sent to meet.

Already an hour had passed and the information screen hung over the door had updated five times, always with dismal news. Half an hour behind schedule had become forty minutes, then an hour. Without a word of apology it had just flipped to tell anybody who might want to know that plus or minus eighty minutes was the best to be expected. Around her, fellow meeters and greeters sucked their teeth and swore.

The only person unconcerned was the young woman behind the bar. She preferred a high turnover of customers because the tips were better as people left their change and ran to a platform but the percentage on a bill for those stuck for an hour or two mounted up as well – and she herself was going nowhere.

Sofie sighed and made her way to the counter. “Another? Mint again?” she was asked. She looked slightly longingly at the array of bottles along the back shelf. If Carlo was here she knew he would have been into his third beer by now.

The bar woman followed her glance. “Maybe a beer, a small one?”

She gave in. “Why not? But I hope this is the last delay.” The shrug she received with her glass suggested that hope was eternal, and so were late trains.

In the back pocket of her jeans her phone vibrated: not just a quick burst but a sustained and slightly uncomfortable jarring, almost distracting her enough to make her spill the beer as she stepped back behind her table and sat down.

“You took long enough to answer. And why aren’t you back yet?” Oxana, the General Manager’s words were full of fierce accusation. Probably better not to mention the beer.

“Sorry,” said Sofie without going into detail, and then explained about the ever lingering train.

"Well, get a move on. I've got better things for you to do." The call ended abruptly. Sofie wondered how she, personally, was meant to make a train and a Balkan violinist arrive quicker. What would Oxana have done – jumped from a helicopter, landed on the locomotive and whipped the driver until he drove fast enough?

A second beer was being contemplated but had not actually been ordered when a flurry of movement alerted Sofie to the idea that the train might actually be close to the station. She gathered up her festival welcome sign and followed the crowd out to where the platform had its exit lift and escalators. She wondered whether to wait at the bottom but realised she might not be seen in the throng of passengers heading for other platforms, so she made her way up and stood halfway between the possible conveyances, smiling encouragingly, her sign clasped against her stomach.

Almost all the passengers had made their way passed her when there was a rumble to her left and a slight blonde woman pulling a small suitcase, accompanied by a station official pushing a large black object of unmistakeable shape on a small trolley, approached.

"Hallo, are you from the festival?"

"Yes," said Sofie, "but..."

"I'm Ivana. You were here for me?" she asked, reacting to Sofie's obvious puzzlement.

"Yes, for Ivana, but I was told you were a violinist, not a harpist."

"Ah," the harpist paused. "I wonder what the orchestra have been rehearsing."

"And I think we'll need a bigger taxi," said Sofie as they headed to the lift.





Part II

Virus Times



New Season, Same Desk

A month before the festival was to get underway, Sofie found herself surprised to be sitting at her old desk in the office. She had sworn that one season of that festival, so far from home in Estonia, was enough. More than that, one season of fierce Oxana, the chain-smoking General Manager, and most of all one of her co-intern, the frightful Italian Carlo, was more than enough.

But here she was. 'Why?' she asked the window. A sensible answer was unlikely to come from anywhere else.

The real answer was easier and prosaic. The expected wonderful jobs had not flooded in while she was at home immersed in her studies – and Oxana's offer had a little more money attached than the year before.

Her desk was clear and the one joined to it facing her was empty. She doubted either would stay like that for long. She sat down and began to unpack the shoulder bag that housed all the odds and ends she had brought from home – the things she had missed the previous year: a photo of her dog taken on a Baltic beach, a little wooden box decorated with enamel flowers that she kept her hair bands in, and her own mug with 'LEAVE ME ALONE!' emblazoned across it.

Sofie thought back to the last time she had sat there, a few days after the previous festival. On the last night, at the close of the staff party, fierce Oxana had announced that that a new Artistic Director would be appointed in the coming month. That in itself was not surprising. The holder of

the post had never been quite the same since he had spent 12 hours locked in a orchestra van with only a drum kit for company.

Worse, though, or better depending on your viewpoint, Oxana had also announced that she would be a candidate herself. For once Sophie and Carlo's groan had been unanimous. They had spent three months being ground down and treated only marginally better than the ash on the end of Oxana's multiple cigarettes. The thought of her holding absolute power was grim.

Oddly, given her constant griping at their uselessness, Oxana had specifically thanked Sofie and (after an embarrassing pause) also Carlo for all their hard work. She even suggested that they might have rescued the festival from dire consequences. Accidentally, of course. Oxana could never admit to not being in total control.

Carlo had sat the other side of her desk. He had sighed and smiled at the same time – another of his annoying habits. “So, I will be leaving you, *Cara mia*. I am desolated.”

“You’ll be much more than desolated if you call me *Cara mia* again,” Sofie had warned darkly.

She grinned at the memory. Carlo had been ghastly but, with the rosy haze of nine months, he was sometimes quite funny: perhaps. Anyway, fierce Oxana hadn’t got the job. Sofie had seen online during the winter that no candidate had been declared suitable for a festival of such great national and international distinction. Achile Djurekschyk had been reappointed AD - albeit without much enthusiasm - by the Mayor.

“Ah, you’re back. Good.” Sofie half turned to see Oxana striding into the room, leading a small woman with short light brown hair and tortoiseshell glasses. “This is Mathilde. She’s new, like you were last year, and she’s French, which is something that is not her fault. Show her the ropes, will you?” and with that Oxana strode back out.

But not quite. In the doorway she called over her shoulder. “Don’t let her get too comfortable. Carlo will be back tomorrow.”

The welcoming smile froze on Sofie’s face. She groaned.



Proximity

When Carlo ambled into the office for the first time at the start of his new internment, as he rather unfortunately described his job, he was surprised and not entirely delighted to find Sofie already installed. He had hoped for some fresh blood, or at least a replacement female sparring partner. His jousting with Sofie felt stale – so much old news. Still, he was gallant enough to feign delight.

“Sofie, how superb to see you again, and such a surprise!” She had stayed seated behind her desk. Undaunted, Carlo clasped her round the shoulders. “I felt sure you would have resisted the lure of La Oxana, When did you get back?”

Sofie shrugged, which both showed her uncertainty and also released her from Carlo. “The day before yesterday. I thought about it hard but in the end, I thought it made sense to come. But you? Surely you hate the place?”

“Hate? No, no. It amuses me, Oxana amuses me, even you my dear Sofie, add to my amusement.”

It was extraordinary, Sofie glowered, how in one line Carlo could make her want to throttle him.

Carlo went on. “Besides. The winter has been dull and though it is always winter in this place, there is something useful for me to do. Perhaps it has been the same for you.” He moved round to sit at his desk, where he faced Sofie straight on.

A smile of triumph showed in Sofie’s eyes. “No, not there. You’ve been moved. There is a new intern.”

“A new boy?” Carlo looked stunned.

“No. A new woman. Working with me. You are going to be in Oxana’s office, you lucky thing.”

“In Oxana’s office! But that means....”

Sofie was finding it hard not to giggle. “It means she will have you all to herself – and *vice versa*. I’m sure you will find it fascinating.”

Once the shock began to subside, Carlo went over, leaned against the window, and gazed at the street three floors below. The proximity to Oxana would be hard to bear – her snide comments, shouting at everyone and everything (even

her coffee mug was not spared) – and there would be her constant supervision. On the other hand, he thought to himself, he would be at the heart of the action. He might even be made her official assistant or better. She would be out at meetings a lot, surely, leaving him free to enjoy his own pursuits online.

His reverie was broken by a bark from behind him in the doorway. “Ah you got here. Better late than never. Blaming Italian trains or planes?”

“Hello, Oxana,” replied Carlo affably while Sofie smirked.

“No time for that, young man. Go and sort yourself out in my office. Yours is the small desk by the wall. And Sofie – meeting room. Artistic Director. Ten minutes.”

Carlo waited until Oxana had left before moving away from his perch. “She hasn’t improved, has she,” he muttered as he followed her out.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Sofie called after him, “she seemed quite mellow to me.”



Home Is Where the Laptop Is

In the Festival’s secluded valley in the hills of Europe the sun had come out along with tentative yellow flowers in city window boxes. On the trains skiers in knotted caps and après-skiers in faux fur hats were gradually being replaced by cheerful types with walking poles, sensible shoes and the sort of knapsacks only suitable for spare socks, a packed lunch and bottles of water. Rambling up hills was taking over from falling down them.

At least that was what should normally have been happening. The reality was gloomier. As news of insurgent disease spread, the skiers had been sent home early and the ramblers had been told to tend their gardens and plod around their living rooms like inmates of mediaeval gaols.

In her office Oxana coughed fiercely. This was not unusual. Oxana smoked whenever she could and coughed twice as often as she puffed from her cigarette. Nonetheless, these days a cough was an issue. As the coughing reached its peak

Oxana rummaged in the bottom drawer of her desk for a fresh pack of tissues. She did not want to spread any wandering germs but equally she really did not want her staff to think she was sickening. Oxana was famous for never being ill.

In the general office Carlo sat across the desk from Sofie and sniffed. His exile to Oxana's office had lasted less than a week. So had the new intern, Mathilde. Oxana had found sharing a room with Carlo as intolerable as Mathilde had found working for Oxana.

Carlo read through the daily list of tasks Oxana had emailed him and sniffed again. As he glanced into the coffee mug and saw it was empty a further derisive sniff was inhaled.

Sofie glared at him. "Do you have to do that?"

"Do what?" Carlo raised his eyes and looked puzzled.

"That thing with your nose."

"What thing with my nose?" he sniffed.

"That. It's making me nervous."

"It's just a habit. I am not trying to clear anything."

"All the same..." Sofie reached into her bottom drawer just as Oxana had and pulled out a packet of tissues. "Have these – and then don't leave them on your desk. Go and set fire to them or something."

"I'm breathing in, not out," complained Carlo. The sound of Oxana's volcanic chest reverberated from her side of the door.

"What goes up must come down," Sofie observed, giving Carlo her most imperatively narrowed eyes.

Carlo's response was predictable. He sniffed. So was Sofie's. She threw the tissues at him.

From Oxana's room came a wail, the sort of noise (thought Carlo) you would expect from a bull about to become a bullock. "What's wrong with her now," he muttered to Sofie, "has she sat on something sharp?"

The answer was not long in coming as Oxana herself strode into the room. "Right you two. Pack up. You're going home."

"Italia, Estonia, Utopia... but why, what have we done?" queried Carlo.

"Nothing," said Sofie, looking shocked.

"Exactly," Oxana agreed unreasonably, "but that is not why you are going home. Orders from above. When I say home I do not mean those places at either ends of Europe. I mean your rooms here; that's where you will work. The office is being closed. All offices are being closed. The Virus has reached the capital and now they are closing down the whole country, no exceptions."

"But what about...?" Sofie began.

"No buts. Pick up thy laptops and walk." Their boss turned, headed back into her room and slammed the door behind her.

Carlo wondered whether he would ever hear Oxana misquoting the Bible again. He shrugged and obeyed, winking at Sofie as he gathered his odds and ends into a plastic bag. "Be seeing you, Angel." He was out of the door before Sofie had shut down her screen.



No Time To Lose

Carlo struggled from his bed at 8.15am, almost as usual. Getting up had never been his thing but the work imperatives of shower, coffee, breakfast pastry, dressing to his satisfaction (a level judged by whether any girl glanced at him while he waited for the tram), the tram ride itself and more coffee from the place on the corner opposite the festival office, all required him to force himself from under the duvet at 7.45 most mornings.

Now the office was forbidden territory, though, and even had it not been, the corner café was closed by national decree, so an extra half hour in bed seemed minimal recompense. Not going into the office did not mean throwing out office hours, the General Manager, fierce Oxana, had made clear in a flurry of emails and WhatsApp posts. The staff meeting would happen as usual, via Skype, at 8.45am.

Resentment grew as Carlo replaced one t-shirt with another and pulled on a moderately clean jumper. He never wore pyjamas and considered leaving the bottom half bare

since it would not be visible through his computer's camera as he sat at the kitchen table. His state of undress could be a token protest. What, though if he wanted more coffee? He stuck his legs into track suit trousers and even dragged a comb through his hair.

There was a frantic scramble to have a steaming *espresso* next to the screen and the machine functioning so that his little green button was showing when the peremptory "join me" instruction flashed up. Carlo marvelled at Oxana's ability to make even the neutral messages of Skype seem like a bloody-minded order. But he was there, smiling, and much more importantly, was there before Sofie showed herself.

"Glad you could make it," observed Oxana as Sofie's image increased the number of mini-screens on view a couple of minutes later.

It was all Carlo could do to keep a straight face. "*Buon giorno*," he chirruped. Sofie's hair was dishevelled, her face devoid of make-up and dark bags hung beneath both eyes, "or is it?"

Sofie could have explained that the man in the apartment below had dealt with being locked in by playing heavy metal at stadium volume until three. When he stopped, the baby upstairs had taken over with lungs that clearly had no infection. She was not given the chance.

"Right, no time for small talk," barked Oxana. "The festival is only 17 weeks away and there is just as much work to do as there was yesterday. So if you all think you can relax on the sofa in front of your favourite drama box set, forget it."

Carlo ostentatiously had a sip of his *espresso*, raising the tiny cup to his mouth with the deliberation of wine master sampling the bouquet of an expensive vintage. Time to provoke.

'Surely it will have to be postponed, at the very least?' Somehow the knowledge that Oxana was three kilometres away seemed protection enough against the inevitable explosion.

From Oxana there was no explosion for once. Only cold venom. "They wouldn't dare."

Sofie was inlined to believe her. In the meantime, all was quiet in her apartment block. She needed sleep. It was time for an online malfunction.



The Trials of Lock-down Mornings

The apartment was simply not big enough for three people all day, all night, even if they were family or lovers, or just friends you really liked. For three women who hardly knew each other it was already proving a strain after only a week. The problem, Sofie thought as she emerged from the shower and tried to find her own towel on the over crowded wall hooks, was the clash of habits – and the clash with Inez. Christina wasn't so bad.

Sofie dried, wrapped the towel around and attacked her wet blonde hair with a comb brush. Normally, when they were each going to work, Inez was an irritant but not a problem. She came from somewhere north of where sherry is made in Spain and she worked for an airline at the small airport that served the festival's city, so she was usually in her uniform and out of the house in the morning before Sofie and Christina needed the bathroom. Yes, she left it looking like a wooden town after a tornado but order could be restored without too much effort.

Now, though, the airline was not flying and Inez was at home and, like them, working from the shared sitting room – or the kitchen, or the hallway, or her bedroom with the door open. And she talked, loudly, incessantly and with no sense of what was important and what was dementedly trivial. Inez made Carlo, thought Sofie ruefully, seem like the perfect companion.

Worse, much worse, was that Sofie could not tell Inez to shut up. The woman was being paid to talk all the time. She was now the prime call centre contact in the area for her airline's customer service department. People actually wanted her to talk to them all the time. It was incomprehensible.

It was also impossible to concentrate on your own work anywhere in the flat even if you shut all the doors. Once it got into the consciousness, the incessant drone of Inez's monotone voice became like the buzzing of a fly or the dripping of a tap; wherever it was coming from you were aware of it.

Sofie emerged from the bathroom, crossing with Chris-

tina, who nodded long-sufferingly as they passed. Christina was a town housing manager, the only local of the three women and ten years older. It was her flat. Inez and Sofie were just the lodgers occupying what had been spare bedrooms (or, as the estate agent's description would have put it, the dining room and child's playroom).

Renting out the rooms had seemed like a great idea for having a bit of younger company and easing the pressure of expenses. Now it was torture from which Christina would not be freed for as long as the town was in virus shutdown. No movement, it seemed, except between Inez' vocal chords.

It was still before nine when Sofie set her laptop on the table in the sitting room and logged on. Her Skype group ring chimed in officiously. Her shoulders slumped and she swore. 8.45 team meeting. She had forgotten – again.

"So glad you could join us." General Manager Oxana's fierce and acid tones greeted her as the other festival staff's faces gathered. "We were hoping you would. There's a little list for you on the email. Website messages in English, German, and anything else you think you can write in. Carlo and I have discussed them already. By midday please." And the screen went blank.

Sofie had just abandoned the table miserably to make herself coffee when her phone started vibrating. She looked at the screen ident. Carlo – all she needed. "Yes?"

"Yes indeed!" he announced smugly. "Maybe today I am not the one in Oxana's guilty book."

"Carlo...."

"Sofie, dear friend..."

She could feel her fury rising. "I suppose you think it's funny."

"Not at all. You know you have my eternal support."

That was the end. Sofie had enough sense to hurl her phone into the armchair, not onto the hard floor, but her emotion was the same. By the time the water for the coffee was boiling she had articulated it in a shout. Sadly it was too full of ***, bleeps and !!! to be reported here. From the bathroom Christina reflected that Estonian must be a good language for swearing in.



The Sound of Silence

Oxana stomped around the empty festival office feeling despondent. What was the point of being General Manager if there was nobody in the building to generally manage? She could be fierce to the walls, angry with the equipment, stropky with the coffee pot and rude to the windows but nobody was there to care. Her useless, spineless Artistic Director, whose tantrums were like the tears of a six year-old, was being pathetic in his country cottage, she assumed. Probably taking his chickens for a walk.

She had tried being fierce on screen. It was not long since she had flayed Sofie with sarcasm for being late to the morning meeting twice, but there was no follow-up. She was just switched off. There was no lingering presence, no atmosphere of dread to cut with a knife. Oxana imagined Sofie shrugging, slouching around her house in pyjamas with pink bunnies on all morning, and ignoring the rebuke utterly. Why Oxana should imagine Sofie had pink bunnies on her pyjamas, she could not say – maybe a psychologist could write a treatise about it. For the record, Sofie was not slouching around and her pyjamas were light blue with silver stars.

With nobody to punish with her cheese-grater voice, Oxana felt lost. There was still a festival to organise – assuming that the virus shutdown would have finished in time. It was hard to know how, though. All her routines (and Oxana had been working for the festival for thirteen years, so had plenty of routines) were being upset, trashed, rendered useless.

She should even now be sending out teams of interns like Sofie and Carlo and school students earning pocket money to put programme brochures in all the cafés around town, piling them at the check-outs of the smarter clothes shops, placing display cases in all the hotels. Not this year. There was nobody to pick them up, no coffees being served, no summer dresses being tried on, no business travellers in the hotels.

The advertising space on official poster sites and in magazines had already been booked, the street banners ordered and newsletters sent out by email to the regular subscribers around the world. The festival's YouTube channel carried exhortations to come back this year. The artist contracts had

been issued and mostly returned. Oxana kicked a desk and opened a window, leaning just far enough out for her cigarette smoke not to blow back into the room.

In one way she felt quite smug. Unlike so many of the festival directors around, she had not yet been ordered to cancel. With three months to go before the opening, there was at least a good chance it would go ahead, if not quite as normal. Indeed, if luck had timed it right, the start of the festival would be the moment when life returned to the streets and people could banish their fears.

She was in the middle of a long drag of tobacco when her phone message alert beeped, almost making her choke. It was impossible to hold the cigarette and balance herself out of the window while reaching for the phone in her back pocket. She let the smoke out gradually, relishing its soothing wisps, before closing the window and looking at the screen.

The message was ominous. "The mayor and the Governor will see you in half an hour. Not in person of course. Here is your Zoom code." She had not asked for a meeting. Why would they think she had?



Fundraising The Modern Way

Carlo was wondering how to construct his morning. He could, after all, quite legitimately do nothing at all – go back to bed, play a video game, lie in the bath until his skin felt like soggy paper. He was an intern, not a full member of staff. His expenses were being paid by the festival, including an allowance for food (which in his definition included 'fermented fruit juice and grain'), but he was officially unemployed in Italy. He was helping the festival out as a mere volunteer, just one with a letter of agreement that, honestly, was not a contract.

It was not a distinction Oxana, the General Manager, recognised and she would have been very fierce with any ministerial official who dared suggest Carlo was not her creature for as long as she wanted. It was hardly a surprise, therefore,

when Carlo's phone rang imperiously just as he was stepping into the aforementioned bath, complete with bubbles. He looked at the device with disgust and considered not answering; no reason, though, why he could not converse and soak at the same time – as long as he didn't drop the phone below the foam.

"Pronto," he acknowledged grudgingly.

"Yes, and that is how I want you," Oxana informed him. "Ready pronto to take notes at my zoom meeting in ten minutes. With the Mayor, so look respectable. I'm emailing you the code now." She rang off.

Carlo sighed. Goodbye to the hot water, adieu to bubbles. What a waste. Still, ten minutes, no problem. He lay back. Three would be enough. He let the warmth suffuse his limbs, loosen his mind. OXXAAANNNA, he breathed fiercely, insolently blowing the bubbles until they became a mountain near his knees.

Nonetheless he was at the kitchen table dressed in shirt and tie (and flip-flops) and logged onto Zoom with a good minute to spare, looking serious and ready to be the perfect assistant.

Oxana was already online but no-one else. She looked at Carlo in disbelief. She would have been prepared to bet at least three packets of cigarettes that he would be late and a mess.

"Good," she said sharply. "Now I want a note of everything. It will need to be accurate because the Mayor refuses to allow recordings. You can type them up and send them to me for editing this afternoon. Is that clear?"

"Si, certo."

The Mayor appeared on screen. She was five years older than Oxana, with her short brown hair dyed red at the ends and a face that looked kindly to her electorate, her comfortable figure reminding them that she took care of the city with maternal concern. Oxana knew just as well though, that the exterior was just that: scenery. Inside the Mayor was an operator who could have taught the Medici family a thing or two about political plotting.

"Madam Mayor, what can I do for you?" Oxana asked. Carlo tried not to grin. He had never heard her try to sound deferential before.

"Ah, Oxana my dear. How good to see you. As you know,

our little problem is getting more acute every day. I have had the Minister putting pressure on me to say there can be no festival this season."

"Oh, but..."

"But as you know I don't give in as easily as that. The festival is what this town is famous for, at least mostly, and to cancel three months ahead seems premature."

"Thank you."

The Mayor inclined her head to accept the thanks. "We must go on, though perhaps not in the same way."

"What are you thinking?" asked Oxana. It was really a pointless question. The Mayor would never tell you what she was thinking – only what she had decided.

"I think we should have alternative festival finance that can benefit the city even if there are only token performances."

"Such as?"

"We make our customers an offer. We open a fund, an appreciation fund. We ask them to make a donation for the future citizens, in other words the children. By the way, we have unfortunately had to decide that your city money for this year's festival will cease next Thursday. However this new fund will reinstate it, so don't worry."

It was not often that Oxana was left with nothing to say and her mouth hanging open. On the separate screen Carlo minuted – silence.

"Now the fund works simply. For every hundred euros a donor gives, the festival gets ten and a child gets a left shoe. If a donor gives two hundred you get seventeen and the child gets a right shoe to complete the pair. Simple, as I said."

Carlo couldn't resist. "And the rest?"

The Mayor shrugged. "We all have expenses."



Insecurity For Some

The 8.45am staff meeting was a nervous one. Days after the usually fierce General Manager, Oxana, had been told bluntly by the immovable Mayor that all the money for the festival was to be cut off, the unthinkable had happened. The Mayor had phoned her personally: not via Skype or Zoom, a private old-fashioned phone call.

"My dear Oxana," the Mayor began. She was using her smoothest voice so Oxana knew there was trouble ahead. "I have a little confession. The idea I told you about for my children's fund was true but my remarks that the darlings would get one left shoe for a hundred euros and the right shoe for two hundred was of course my little joke."

"Very droll, I'm sure Madam Mayor," said Oxana icily.

"I thought so too. Naturally the fund will be dispersed according to need: hungry children are not good for this city. "This Mayor is not good for the city's hungry children, Oxana thought, but refrained from saying so. "And about your festival money..."

"You've decided we should carry on as normal," interrupted Oxana. "Thank you."

"Ah, um," the Mayor was never averse to thanks but knew they were about to be withdrawn, "not quite, I'm afraid. Not as normal, naturally."

"Naturally,"

"We have had to make some adjustments. As you will have realised your city funds were not totally stopped last Thursday. That was because of computing error, so don't get too excited. From next month you will only receive half the usual amount."

"But..."

"Hard times, hard decisions, Oxana." The line went dead.

And that was the message Oxana had to relay at the morning Zoom staff meeting to her dispersed and home-imprisoned employees. Luckily not all the festival's money came from the city but Oxana had a nasty feeling that where the Mayor led, sponsors would soon follow. She had spent the weekend trying to work out who and what should go.

It wasn't easy; production staff were vital this close (eleven weeks) to the event; press officer and accountant essential, though their assistants were not.

On the other hand, hospitality could be pared back in the circumstances, rather cheaper hotels booked for the artists, and 'human resources' could write their own redundancy notices once they had written the others. Tell them last!

She was happy to inform the morning meeting that most jobs were safe for the moment. The moment, she warned, might not be very long and so sighs of relief were premature.

Carlo and Sofie assumed they were inevitably expendable. However, as Oxana tactlessly reminded them in front of everyone else, they were forgetting how cheap they were as interns. Indeed, since the town was overflowing with bored students released from colleges early, they would soon each have their own work experience deputies.

Deputy to the Executive Assistant Intern; now that, thought Sofie as she imagined her new side-kick's fate, really was starting at the bottom of the career ladder.



Transatlantic Considerations

There were worse new arrangements in place at the festival a week after the Mayor had announced that half its money would be withdrawn. Not only was there no office to go to (true for everyone in virus months, of course), there were not the usual layers of management staff between the interns, Estonian Sofie and Italian Carlo, and the General Manager, Oxana. Already the Artistic Director had been told his services were 'in abeyance', as the President of the Board had put it as tactfully as he could.

Many of the rest of the staff, Oxana's deputy, the press office, marketing and the Sponsors' Experience Enhancement Manager (SEEM), had been told they were now GESEE (Government Entertainment Employees Surplus to Enterprise) and a basic income would be sent straight to their supermarket loyalty cards. The cackling was furious but futile.

That left Carlo and Sofie as the first ports of call for

many of the endless enquiries coming in from all quarters: worried audience members, even more worried performers, directors of professional associations (of which the Festival Action Committee on Talent, FACT, was the most annoying), and just the usual quota of mad people demanding either money or to conduct the opening concert.

"I want you to deal with the public," Oxana told Sofie, "you have the sympathetic touch – you also have the advantage of not speaking our language so you will not understand the stupid questions."

"What about the questions that aren't stupid?" Sofie wondered aloud.

"There are none of those, in my experience," Oxana dismissed the idea fiercely. "I will switch the public call number through to your phone."

"Fine," said Sofie, meaning the opposite and trying to remember if she had a spare SIM card hidden somewhere.

"So Carlo," Oxana went on, "that means I want you to deal with the artists. You're Italian so you can lie so much better than Sofie or me." It was an unwarranted slur on his entire nation but Carlo admitted that he was possibly more economical with the actuality on occasion than straight as a fence post Sofie.

His first test came late that afternoon. His phone trilled as he was taking a well-earned siesta in his Spring yellow shorts on the miniscule balcony, not much wider than an expanded window ledge, of his apartment.

"Hi, I guess you're Carlo," an unmistakeably New York City male began.

"*Si, Carlo sono*," Carlo managed to hoist himself onto one elbow.

"Well, that's just dandy. This is Wymark Talgof of Stein Associates here in downtown NYC."

"*Ciao*," murmured Carlo pleasantly,

"You have my wonderful Atlantic City Lady Flute Jugglers booked to open your festival parade in just a few weeks time, I see here."

"Extraordinary!" gurgled Carlo, admitting nothing.

"Well," Wymark was all bonhomie, "it'll be quite some spectacle, I can assure you. They are really something! Now,

I just want to clear a little matter up with your Oxana while we're still in preparation mode."

"You can speak to me. I have her full confidence," Carlo assured him.

"That's as maybe, son. OK. These are my cards – out on the table. We may have a few transport allocation issues coming down the runway: augmented cost scenarios, costume curtailment requirements and the like." The Senior VP of Stein Associates Inc. (*stars procurement specialists since 1931*) paused for a moment. "You still there, Carlo baby?" Carlo adjusted his sunbathing shorts and admitted he was. "So the dice fall like this. We will be passing those costs on down the line to you. What you do with them is your business. I'm emailing Oxana the extra page of the contract now. And a fine morning to you, baby."

"She will be thrilled, I know," Carlo purred, "I will inform her presently and no doubt she will take a considered view of your suggestion." His diplomacy was wasted, though. The line to America was cut.



Money Back?

"All audience members are wonderful," Sofie intoned to herself again and again like a meditation mantra. She walked round and round her bedroom. "All audience members are wonderful. I mean it. I really mean it." She glared at her phone.

Ever since fierce Oxana, the General Manager, the week before had given her the job of dealing with the public during the virus crisis she had come to hate the festival's ticket holders, sponsors and so-called 'friends' in equal measure. She had also come to have new respect (though not much more liking) for her flatmate, Inez, who had been doing the same job for the city's airport for well over a month.

She had been shouted at, pleaded with, threatened with being fired (sponsors would withdraw unless she was) and verbally abused about once per hour. She had been explain-

ing, gently, that the festival had not been cancelled or postponed as there were still nine weeks to go and things might well have changed by then. Therefore she could not arrange an instant refund of ticket money. If the new practice of antisocial distancing was enforced by the authorities, then ticket holders would be given choices at that stage.

Sponsors seemed not to be worried about tickets. They just wanted their money back because they had less of it than they expected – and there was no point promoting themselves at a festival with no rich people going to it. And how could they enjoy pre-concert Champagne two metres away from the guests they were trying to impress?

Sofie was just there to state Oxana's position, she knew that. Moreover, she was not getting paid to be given a hard time – or paid at all, for that matter; at least not enough to interest any tax inspector. Once more the phone buzzed and Sofie's heart sank. Who this time, she thought, and diffidently pushed the button.

"Hi, my name is Carlo. I have to go to several events and I want to know if..."

"Oh, get lost!" yelled Sofie and cut him off.

Seconds later the Skype tone on her laptop sounded. Guess who. Sofie was tempted to ignore him and it but the ring was replaced by the incoming message noise which Sofie knew would not shut up until she told it to.

The written message from Carlo was very unlike him. "Sorry, bad joke perhaps? In fact I was calling with good news."

Sofie grunted, went to the fridge and collected a bottle of chilled water. Good news from Carlo was as unlikely as her water turning into white wine, she thought, but she might as well hear it. She turned back to the computer and pressed the video icon.

Carlo answered quickly and Sofie decided she was seeing more of him than she wanted. He was dressed only in a pair of lemon-yellow shorts. Either his flat was warmer than hers or he saw no need to dress when he was at home.

"So what's the good news, or is that another of your brilliant jokes?"

"No, Sofie *bella*, I mean it. This crazy sponsor has called me, at least he called Oxana and she made me deal with it. She thought he was going to pull out all his money like the others."

“And?”

“He was doing the opposite. He said we must be worried. He had been to some concerts in the festival last summer and had enjoyed himself, more or less. He has a company making plastics that they use for medical gowns so, unlike everyone else, he is doing very well at the moment. He wants to underwrite half the festival costs but he told me to call you first.”

“Amazing, but why call me?”

“It seems you were very nice to him at a concert, or his wife, or something. But he will only give Oxana the money if you are still working here and will accept a presentation during an interval reception.” Carlo chuckled. “Imagine Oxana’s face if you say no.”



The Inadvertent Power of Art

To be Artistic Director of one of Europe’s great festivals, with its history of music, theatre and occasional open-air wash-outs, should surely be an honour to relish. It calls for flair as much as diplomacy, daring as much as a sense of proportion. Most of all it should bring with it a sense that the Director is excited, having fun and expects everyone else to be.

It was slightly strange, therefore, that most of the time this AD was nowhere to be seen. In the midst of the virus crisis there were constant requests for interviews – not just from arts journalists but from the world’s television and radio stations anxious to know his thoughts and find a nugget of inspiration. All were gently but firmly rebuffed and passed on to the General Manager, Oxana, who dealt with them fiercely.

At his best, public appearances had never been AD’s style (he was always known as AD, partly because that was his job title but largely because nobody could remember how to say or spell Achile Djurekschyk) but these days he was not at his best. A night locked by mistake in an orchestral van during last year’s festival had left him a nervous wreck, terrified in equal measure of the dark, enclosed spaces and musical instruments.

This made attending concerts a challenge, musical theatre much worse. He was only really happy these days at *al fresco* poetry readings with a *cappella* accompaniment. Sofie had been assigned to coax him through to the end of that festival but even her powers seemed to be fading in the days of antisocial distancing. She couldn't meet him to coo soothing encouragement and his phone was rarely switched on.

On a Sunday morning, well into the months of emergency, it all came to a head. AD was seen (alone of course) in the empty neoclassical amphitheatre that served up the festival's more spectacular presentations that required fireworks and no roof. He was declaiming – at least the three cleaners who were his audience assumed he was. No sound came, only gestures that reminded the older among them of the late great Marcel Marceau.

He seemed to be weeping. A former dancer himself, he was expert in conveying meaning without sound. At first the cleaners watched in fascination. Then they took a few videos on their phones and tweeted them before resuming their brushing and binning. The tweets took flight. The world watched.

Soon, against the rules, people began to walk to the amphitheatre, keen to see the show for themselves. AD's existential performance had, to use an unfortunate metaphor, struck a chord, probably something in B minor.

None of this was intentional, of course. AD, made claustrophobic by his home walls, had just meant to go for a walk. Along the way the sadness and frustration had started to bubble out. His feet had taken him along the river and then, on their usual route, to the amphitheatre. Once at its centre his old performer self had taken charge and, as he thought, in the solitary splendour he had shown how he felt.

AD did not realise for days after Sofie and Carlo had shepherd him home, rather like a couple of collies driving a reluctant llama (approaching but not touching), that he had become the symbol of the time. The world thought it had been a brilliant expression in an iconic setting of viral alienation. Donations poured in.



Masked Meeting

The sun was shining and people were venturing out to meet at safe if inconvenient distances. Those who mumbled were no longer heard. The art of vocal projection across a pavement and through a face mask became a new and important quality in a friend or colleague. Oxana, festival General Manager, had never had a problem with projection. It was always fierce enough to bounce off a distant wall.

Carlo was naturally loud, even occasionally operatic. Sofie, though, was invariably hard to hear. As well as being quietly spoken her voice had the naturally low pitch of many from the Baltic. Her voice carried weight but not volume. Put a mask over her face as well and the result was a low undulating murmur, like the rumbling of a distant earthquake.

On the first Monday morning after café tables were once again allowed to be set out on the city's pavements, Oxana called her two faithful interns and invited them for coffee. They made their way to the city's almost main square, the one that was large enough to have lots of pleasant terraces but too small to make major demonstrations against the Mayor any fun.

Sofie was punctual as ever and at two minutes to ten was striding up the street, masked against stray viral droplets lingering in the sunshine. There was a piercing whistle behind her – the sort that summons police or greets a goal by the opposing team. She ignored it, assuming such indignities were not aimed at her. She should have known better.

"Hey – Sofie! Wait." Carlo came scurrying up on the other side of the street and started to run across.

"Stop!" Sofie ordered. Carlo did and was almost run over by a Skoda. The driver had assumed, as had Carlo, that he would be well out of the way by the time the car reached him.

"*Per che?*" He spread his arms in a shrug then waved a hand of apology to the shaken Skoda driver.

"We must keep our distance."

Carlo finally reached the same side of the street without accident and fell in behind Sofie with the regulation one and

a half metre gap. "So I am saved from catching your virus but I am killed by the traffic. Great. It's nice to know you care." Sofie was not sure she did but she was also not sure she liked Carlo talking at her from behind, yet there was not enough space on the pavement to walk apart and let others going in the opposite direction pass. A true virus time dilemma.

Luckily they reached the square before a decision had to be made and they quickly spotted Oxana waiting for them at a table for six: the new table for three. The clock bells on a nearby church were striking ten.

"Together – amazing!" said Oxana facetiously as they sat. "No doubt you will be wanting the festival budget to buy you coffee." They agreed. Frankly, on their pay, they thought they deserved pastries as well. Oxana already had her disposable container. After her interns had ordered theirs from the masked waitress (after much repetition as all three struggled to understand each other's muffled accents) Oxana got down to business.

"So, a decision has been taken. Thanks to your sponsor, Sofie, the festival will go ahead in seven weeks from now."

Sofie spoke. The earthquake rumbled closer. "How?"

"Not as we anticipated," Oxana admitted. "I will tell you the details later but today I just want to tell you this. You will be busy. It will be helpful if you do not fight."

Sofie and Carlo looked at each. Sometimes masks were a very good idea. Were they thinking peace or war?



Happy Landings

On Wednesday morning Sofie and Carlo sat across the table from each other outside in the sunshine. The small town square was halfway between their apartments and, after weeks of being stuck in them, the café's tables (spaced wide as per virus regulations) had become their new office without them having to discuss anything complicated. It was just where they naturally felt it right to be when the rain held off.

They had in front of them the much revised plans for

the festival, scheduled – it had been finally confirmed – to start in a month's time. "Hm," said Carlo, "that's good."

"What is?"

"AD has dropped those American cheerleaders. That will be expensive."

Sofie frowned. "Of course he has – he's cancelled the whole opening parade. But why will it be expensive?"

"Because Wymark Talgof of Stein Associates in New York City has threatened to sue the festival in the state of Rhode Island if the Atlantic City Lady Flute Jugglers don't appear or get fully compensated."

Sofie laughed her deep Estonian laugh, like rocks tumbling under water. "Wow – Rhode Island! That will scare him. And anger in three states – New York, New Jersey and that funny little place up the coast. Does it matter?"

"Not unless our esteemed Artistic Director wishes to visit Providence." Carlo shrugged, "but you know what Americans are like. They always think their law is more important than ours, even from a state that is even smaller than your funny little place up the coast."

"Size isn't everything, as you know," she sniffed and peered pointedly at Carlo, who was a little shorter than she was. "So it doesn't matter. Mr. Talgof can go whistle for his money."

"Or even play the flute while juggling." Carlo returned to his perusal of the much mutilated programme. "Oh-oh. This will be fun to manage!"

"What now?" Sofie was becoming a little tired of his 'exclaim then explain' reaction to whatever he was reading.

"Well, it's certainly novel. Second Saturday 16.00. **Opera by Balloon.** *The Flying Dutchman* as you've never seen him before."

Sofie scrolled down and read aloud. "Because Wagner's Dutchman cannot reach his ship while the theatre is closed, and he can't come by sea because we are in the middle of Europe, he has decided to take to the air. The Dutchman's famous wandering will be symbolised as he arrives above the festival amphitheatre in the basket of a hot air balloon. His love, Senta, will have her own balloon too and they will fly passed each other singing while the orchestra plays beneath them."

"Of course, how the opera will end will depend on Senta's courage and who is in charge of keeping the balloons steady from the ground," observed Carlo.

"And if that's you? Sofie asked, signalling to the waiter for more coffee.

"I don't know yet. Maybe I could let the Dutchman go and he would float away until his gas runs out. And Senta, instead of jumping into the sea, could hurl herself from the basket onto a trampoline and – yes, happy ending – catch hold of her lover's balloon as she bounces back up to the sky."

Sofie sniffed. "Ridiculous! Though with a bit of luck she could jump and land on you. Now that would be a happy ending."

"You're too kind," Carlo grinned.



Orchestral Moisture

Preparations for the opening of the festival were feverish with only four weeks to go until the Grand Opening – or, as Carlo had renamed it, the Not-very-grand-any-more Opening. It was all very well going from an indoor to an outdoor festival. It was all fine placing performers at a notionally safe distance from each other on the stage. Everyone understood that this was going to be a peculiar experience for audiences and performers alike. The practicalities were less than practical.

If you were used to being first at a shared music stand, there was now not going to be a second to turn the pages. One union official had suggested violinists should be paid extra for this onerous duty. This was rejected fiercely by General Manager Oxana, who was busy telling Sofie that there was no need to rent extra violin parts. She was going to halve the violinists, not double the copies of the music.

Sofie and Carlo were at their summer office, as they called it; a large café table in a convenient square in the city centre. They were dividing up the dividing jobs.

"If you keep the soloists and conductors apart, I'll be the orchestra enforcer," announced Carlo, using a pen as a

dagger to demonstrate his preferred method.

"Fine," agreed Sofie, "most of them don't like each other anyway, even if they usually pretend it's all love."

"At least all the singers have been banned. No tenors to worry about this year."

"And no sopranos who decide they want you as their pretty poodle for the weekend," Sofie was in sarcastic mood. She was tempted to reach across and ruffle the Italian's hair but just in time remembered that it was against the virus rules – and would have meant Carlo getting his revenge in later, probably involving ice cubes.

"What are we going to do about the brass and wind players? All that spittle!" Carlo wondered.

"Oxana says we should put them into individual full-length plastic tubes – like see-through missile silos but with microphones."

"Great – and how am I meant to get them in and out?"

Sofie considered the problem. "Maybe we can add to the spectacle," she suggested. "You lead the players to their seats, then the men who normally move the scenery for opera drop the tubes over the top of them with a crane. The players can be let out at the interval."

Carlo was not impressed. "If anyone thinks I am going to be charge of cleaning the things, they're wrong. And then there's the issue of your conductors. You know what they're like. Sweat everywhere. Drip and spray, shout and splash!"

"Horrible," Sofie shivered despite the summer heat. "Disposable shower curtains?"





Part III

Recovery Season



Here We Go Again

In the days before the new festival season opened, Sofie's after work glass of white wine by the river with AD (the Artistic Director, Achile Djurekschyk, much easier abbreviated) had become an instant tradition.

The rest of the team, especially General Manager Oxana and Sofie's partner in disaster management, Carlo, had not objected. As Oxana had muttered, 'anything that keeps that nutter off my back and out of my hair is fine by me'. Not seeing Carlo also suited AD, whose mental equilibrium had never quite recovered from being locked in an orchestra's dark lorry for many hours with only drums for company – an incident during the previous year's festival from which Carlo had rescued him.

AD and Sofie would walk the ten minutes from the office to the water-side terrace bar in silence at 6.30 each evening. Once seated with wine and dishes of olives and cheese in front of them formality lapsed and masks – literal and metaphorical – were removed. AD became Achile (Sofie was always Sofie). There were rules, though: no discussion of theatre, opera or serious music and absolutely no mention of festivals – theirs or anybody else's.

At first they had struggled to find things to talk about. Sofie had told AD a bit about Estonia but that had not lasted more than a glassful. They did not know each other well enough to discuss their love life or lack of it – and the twenty year gap between them made them shy. AD had talked a bit about his years as a dancer but that came a little too close to festival business. He embarked on the inspiration for his poetry but since it was in a language that Sofie didn't share,

the fascination was hard to sustain. Politics brought Sofie to the edge of fury and AD to the brink of hysteria. It was not a subject for relaxation.

To the surprise of both, the subject that united them turned out to be tennis - and one player in particular. Sofie mentioned that she had a secret passion for Alexander Zverev. She thought she was surprised but then realised she was not when AD smiled and admitted that he did too. Sofie had instantly relaxed. AD obviously had no ulterior motive in meeting her for a drink each evening.

This particular evening was different, though, because the festival was due to start the following day. AD was on edge and even wine and a discussion of Zverev's latest victory was not enough to calm him. Sofie was as certain as she could be that her own preparations were complete. There was nothing AD could do either.

The scheduled parade through the main streets had been cancelled for viral safety, the American girl cheerleaders told not to turn up, however threatening their agent became. A light display would be the substitute, due to enliven the skies as soon as dusk fell, shone from the town hall and the castle. In the closed courtyards of the old town's ancient mansions dancers would mime their frustration to all citizens watching an extended edition of the local TV news. A soprano would sing songs of longing.

Sofie watched as the tension in AD's face set off a twitch at the side of his mouth when she was thoughtless enough to mention it. She called for two more glasses. "Don't worry," she reassured him, "it's an inspired idea."

AD stared into his wine and frowned. "Inspiration is one thing. Getting it right is quite another," he observed mournfully.



Stardom Beckons

Much to everybody's surprise the opening night of the new festival seemed to have gone rather well. The fireworks had fired without setting the ancient palace or even Carlo ablaze. In the amphitheatre outside the centre of town all the tape he had stuck down in the heat of the day had

generally kept apart the audience watching the big screens and the accompanying live but well spread out dancers. The brass and percussion ensemble had fanfares and thundered behind perspex screens to fine effect. The audience had queued appropriately for beer and wine handed down in plastic glasses and most had obeyed the instructions to chuck them in bins provided afterwards and not on the ground. Even General Manager Oxana smiled and forgot to be fierce with her staff as the lights were switched off and they trudged home close to midnight.

AD, the tired Artistic Director, bowed gracefully to Sofie when he walked by. "I think we did OK," he grinned.

"So all your worries had no foundations."

"Foundations, yes, but luckily nothing built on them. There's always tomorrow, though."

"And there's always tomorrow's success," Sofie reassured him. AD sighed and plodded off into the night. Sofie followed soon after, and was glad to find her bed. Nothing, not even the incessant noise through the wall of her Spanish flatmate talking into the phone, was going to keep her awake.

The next morning came far too quickly and Sofie began to remember what the festival routine was really like: late to bed, early to rise, food grabbed on the run and eaten without stopping, endless text messages demanding even more instant action. She lay in bed for a moment wishing the light would go away and the birds stop sounding so sure of themselves. She checked the time on her phone for the third time, stabbed open the message file and groaned.

Three unread messages; the first from Oxana. "Expect you at office 8.30 sharp," it read. The second one was also from Oxana. "Cancel that. Make it at 8."

The third one was at least more expansive but it was from Carlo, only sent five minutes earlier. That must have been the one that woke her up. "*Cara*," it began, "I think Ox spit blood Something cancelled Not our fault She don't care."

Sofie was impressed with herself that she had managed to wake up (almost), shower, dress, pass her favourite café to get a decent carry-out coffee and still be in the office at 8.07. Better still, despite the fierce summons, Oxana only came in a minute later, making it look as if Sofie had been waiting for ages. And best of all, Carlo did not make it until 8.11, so drawing the full weight of Oxana's sarcasm and disgust.

Sofie found it hard not to smirk. Carlo took one look at her and wondered what he wanted to throw at her most – a chair or boiling oil.

“So what is the crisis?” Carlo asked once Oxana had stopped berating him.

“***** children’s entertainers again!” announced Oxana with too many expletives, luckily in a language neither Carlo nor Sofie understood.

“Let me guess. They’ve cancelled and the show is in the amphitheatre at 11?” Carlo suggested.

“Precisely.”

“And you want us to stand at the entrance and break the news to all the little darlings.”

“No. I want you two to take over.”

“But....” Carlo began.

Sofie could tell what was coming and decided to stop the idea before it started. “I will not be a stage horse,” she said firmly, “either end.”

“No”, agreed Oxana, “but you can both take the roles you know best. A pair of clowns.” She slammed her office door before the protests could erupt.



Never Trust The Weather

Sofie sat in the draughty wooden hut that was usually occupied by the car park attendant at the city’s opera house but was now erected inside a gateway to a field at the edge of the town, leading down to the river. The rain was falling with relentless energy – one of those summer drenchings that happen after a hot dry day. It was turning the field fast into a muddy bog.

Sofie was cold but not actually wet, except for her feet. She was fast coming to the conclusion as certain as the rain that tonight’s festival performance might have seemed a good idea at the time but it was a very bad one now.

The scene on which she looked was a mess in every sense. Somewhere in the distance two increasingly

desperate singers were trying to hear their orchestral cues as their make-up turned to sludge and their costumes wilted.

This is how the sorry spectacle had unfolded. All those months ago the Artistic Director had thought how solemn and pertinent it would be to react to the Me Too movement by staging Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle* as the ultimate warning against getting mixed up with conniving powerful men (his own recent break-up being a touch raw still). He had recruited a particularly doom-laden production from Bad Sodersheim's theatre that featured a gnarled Bluebeard and an ardently innocent Judith. It was to play before the run of his commissioned opera, rescheduled to return from the previous season after its scandalous success, engineered by Carlo: the appalling Pimpelbaum's *Waldo The Necromancer*.

Of course, both should have taken place indoors. Then came COVID.

Bluebeard had his castle newly built in a riverside setting, handy for a quick getaway by water. It was not exactly a stone edifice, sadly: merely a scaffolding stage usually used for rock concerts. Rather than disturb the peace with big loudspeakers, AD had cleverly arranged for the opera to be broadcast simultaneously on radio, so that the audience could park their cars in the field and listen while they watched through their windscreens, safe inside their automobile bubble. Brilliant.

Towards nightfall the cars began to gather and Sofie scanned their tickets from behind the window of her hutch, before passing the drivers on to Carlo's small cohort of helpers, who guided them to their vantage point. The field sloped in a way not much different from a raked concert hall, so sight lines were not a problem.

Then the rain came.

At the moment in the opera when Bluebeard revealed the lake of tears behind his sixth door, the projected scene became indistinguishable from the field where the audience was parked: a swamp, a hill of treacherous mud. The view of the stage was only possible between increasingly rapid sweeps of windscreen wipers.

The reception on car radios began to crackle and buzz. At first people thought there must be a thunderstorm coming - one hysteric even suspected aliens, another thought Bluebeard's ghost was having his revenge, changing round the meaning of Me Too - but then the music faded out and

an announcer came on air. "We apologise for the sound quality. Unfortunately water and microphones do not mix well together."

The music never returned. As Bluebeard - now sodden and catching a cold that would keep him from the stage for a month - sang his final notes, only the stagehands heard him. He was drowned out by the sound of engines revving as car wheels buried themselves in mud.

Inside her hut Sofie sighed and watched as the cavalry arrived: Carlo driving a tractor to tow the audience to firm roads home.



Exclusivity Pays

An early highlight of the festival was much anticipated and completely sold out before it was publicly announced. The Artistic Director, AD, had insisted on booking the greatly renowned but notoriously difficult pianist from Warsaw, Jerzy Pizhonanhow, for a solo recital. It was the only option since the pianist refused to work outside and with an orchestra practising harder on its social distancing than concerto accompaniment.

Jerzy (no one dared call him that except in bed) was now in his early seventies but in his youth had been something of a tearaway – brilliant, a competition winner who could be guaranteed to charm and terrify the judges in equal measure. In those days he was a skinny youth with wild and flowing black hair. Now he was bald and a trifle rotund but the eyes were still piercing, the voice a dominating rasp.

He was also one of the most expensive pianists in the world and AD had booked him just before the wretched COVID virus bit. Jerzy's personal fee was eye-watering but the extras were budget breakers. He would tootle South to the festival with a coterie of sycophants and an advance guard, comprising of his own piano, piano shifters and the only technician he allowed to tweak the hallowed instrument built to his exacting specifications. All would have to be housed in the same hotel and available for whenever he wished to practice – and he insisted on being at the festival for four days before his recital.

Perhaps the only way the festival could normally afford him was to stage a gala concert in the local opera house and sell two thousand tickets at operatic prices. Now, as General Manager Oxana reminded AD fiercely, there could barely be a third of that number allowed in and Jerzy's contract was watertight. They were liable and not insured.

It was just by luck that they had their argument in the pre-festival days at an outside café table shared with Sofie and Carlo, who sipped their coffee, stared at their laptop screens and pretended not to hear.

As the fight went on next to them, Sofie looked up over the top of the screen. "Carlo, remember that sponsor who said he would only pay if I was working here?"

Carlo snorted. "What do you think his idea of sponsorship is – that thing in *Figaro*?"

"*Droit de seigneur*?"

"Whatever – but it means you..."

"I know what it means and no, I won't. I've had an idea though." Sofie waved her hand between AD and Oxana, making them pause in mid battle.

"Yes, Sofie?" smiled AD. Oxana snarled.

"Could we do it in the ballroom of the castle and make it sponsors only? Then sell it to the TV and make it pay-per-view on the internet?"

"Like a boxing match", exclaimed Carlo.

"Possibly," admitted Oxana, "though they will have to pay a fortune."

And that was how it was. Thirty sponsors sat anti-socially distanced on gilded chairs with the names of their companies and foundations on the back as the cameras patrolled the room waiting for Pizhona how to play Chopin *Ballades*. The world watched in anticipation and Oxana counted the subscriptions. Would she be in profit by the interval?



Hesitation

Jerzy Pizhonianhow strode to the piano a little late. This was to be expected. He was always a little late. It added to his legend, heightened the expectancy of the audience and meant that the announcers for the live TV and radio broadcasts came prepared with plenty of background material. Since they were paid by the minute, only when they were on air, he was doing them a big favour. They could feel their fees doubling and they smiled happily as the great man procrastinated in his dressing room.

Usually he procrastinated because of nerves. This would have astonished anyone who saw the confident and nonchalant way he ambled to the piano, smiled at the audience and played with such relaxed contemplation. If only they realised!

This time, however, he was late because of the opposite. He dawdled because he was talking to Carlo and thoroughly enjoying it. He was, after all, talking on his favourite subject: himself. Carlo, being something of a natural psychologist as well as an easy-going young man, allowed Jerzy to rattle on, interjecting the occasional '*bene*', '*certo*' and '*eccelente*' in encouragement. He even once ventured a sympathetic '*ah perfido*'!

The trouble was that both found time an elastic commodity. In the ballroom the Mayor was seated in the middle, her husband dutifully beside her plus two metres. The festival's sponsors and patrons were arranged behind, ranked according to the generosity of their patronage, with the most parsimonious at the back. Ironically, and a point missed by Oxana, this gave them a massive publicity advantage. Every time the camera at the back of the room zoomed from a long to a close shot, it was the logos on the chairs at the back of the room that achieved first prominence.

For the moment, though, nobody was zooming anywhere. The audience shuffled and murmured. On screen the presenter smiled at the lens and went onto the third page of her explanation of Chopin's *Ballade No. 1 in G minor*. Luckily it is one of those pieces about which there is plenty to say.

Backstage there were whispered conversations outside

Jerzy's closed dressing room door: producer through an ear piece to production assistant, production assistant to Sofie. Laughter percolated through the door. Sofie shrugged, sighed and opened it after a peremptory knock.

"Ready?" she asked, glaring at Carlo.

The great Pizhonanhow froze mid sentence. "I am always ready," he announced and swept passed her. It was Carlo's turn to shrug before following the pianist.

A relieved production assistant talked back to the producer waiting in the van outside in the courtyard of the castle. "Thirty seconds." She smiled at the pianist, put out her hand ready to open the door that led into the back of the ballroom, and looked at her watch.

After counting down from ten she opened the door with a flourish and the clapping began. Nothing happened. Pizhonanhow stood like a statue, a look of utter panic on his face. The production assistant watched him without understanding. Sofie leaned against the wall. This was not her problem. Carlo glanced back at her, then studied the terrified eyes of the musician for a second as the clapping began to falter. Only one thing for it, he decided, and gave Jerzy an almighty shove in the back, shooting him through the doorway, then slammed the door shut and leaned hard against it.

Carlo looked back at Sofie, grinning. "Can't let him change his mind."

A minute or so later, after a brief silence, the hesitant, meditative opening notes of the *Ballade* reached them through the woodwork. "I think we deserve a glass of Jerzy's dressing room supplies. I'll get another bottle before the interval."



Afternoon Delight

Quite why the authorities had decided that the most popular events should be held in the heat of the afternoon, Sofie failed to understand. Maybe it was to discourage parties late in the evening; maybe the idea was that everyone, including assembled viruses, would wilt in the heat and be easy to marshal. Maybe they would just stay at home.

They were unlikely to want to listen on radio, she thought. The *Saturday Afternoon In The Park By The River* special was likely to be one of the noisiest and least pleasant of the Artistic Director's inspirations – even worse than the grim opera he had commissioned, *Waldo The Necromancer*. AD had decided the perfect way to spend the afternoon was listening to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (PLUS OTHER GREATEST HITS!!).

Why not? That had been Sofie's question too until AD had explained over one of their early evening glasses of wine that to play the concertos he had booked the Carpathian Saxophone Orchestra and the country's most famous heavy metal group, Steel Strumpet.

As Carlo had pointed out without mercy, the idea was bad enough as a 'classics reach out' spectacle when AD had thought it would be on a rock stage with Steel Strumpet fans packed against the railings. With numbers halved and the audience (or 'music victims' as Carlo labelled them) being asked to keep their distance, the whole thing was likely to be, Carlo again suggested, "so far from a Venetian abandoned girls' home it might as well be on the moon", and he wished it was.

In the event, Sofie admitted, the saxophones and electric guitars were played so skilfully that the result was not too bad – as long as you were on the far side of the river. She was, Carlo was not. He was in a tent backstage wearing ear plugs and drinking his own preparation of fizzy water and fresh lemon.

Winter finished and there was to be an interval before the musicians returned to offer their version of *Sea Storm* (a new work freely adapted from Vivaldi's *La Tempesta di Mare*). Carlo went about his duties, making sure everyone had cold towels and energy drinks from the fridges. Once the towels had been used, they were to be thrown into disinfected plastic bins which would be sealed by Carlo once the bands were back on stage.

He was just mopping down the outside of the fridge with bleach when he felt a hand on his back. "Carlo, darling," a deep but unmistakably female voice purred. He turned, almost straight into the arms of the lead Carpathian saxophonist.

"Can I help?"

"Not now, perhaps. But later I shall want some personal advice."

"You will? What about?"

"Oh, you know," she fingered the collar of his shirt, "little things – like where we can go to discover how clever you are with ice – and the true meaning of *L'Estro Armonico*."

Carlo gulped, studied her for a moment, and smiled. "I know just the place."



Carlo, Not At His Best

A quartet of acoustic guitarists strumming gently was about the only form of music Carlo thought he could tolerate on this festival morning. He was starting to realise that being intern in charge of artists backstage was not without its perils. The evening before he had thought nothing could hurt the head harder than saxophones and rock band combining in Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* but it turned out he was wrong.

The morning after a night on the town with a Carpathian saxophonist made him feel that his head was being crushed between two rocks by an angry mammoth. He knew what he had started drinking; bad white wine. What he had finished with, he could not say: probably something blended by Count Dracula specially for his partners in crime when he was entertaining Genghis Khan's close family.

Carlo felt his way to the Green Room with all the care of a bomb disposal team and sank down in an armchair expressly reserved for performers. He did not care. He was unlikely to live to see any consequences. The stage manager poked her head round the door, took one look at Carlo's face (a pale shade of green-grey), nodded and retreated. She was back five minutes later carrying a can of Coke, a long glass of tomato juice and a paper bag.

"Sugared pastry, Bloody Mary and these," she said, pulling a sachet of painkillers from her pocket and arranging the treatments on the small table beside the armchair. "Have them all and then wash them down with the Coke. It was invented originally as a hangover cure but you look as if you

need the full nuclear option.” Carlo raised fragile eyes to her and nodded. Talking seemed as hard as walking.

“And,” his morning nurse went on, “get it down quickly. The players are on their way from the hotel. You’re lucky they are walking,” Carlo groaned.

He was just about upright and had parked his Bloody Mary glass on the window sill behind a curtain when the four guitarists from Dalmatia invaded the room. If he expected, and hoped for, a quartet of elderly gentlemen as subdued as their instruments, he was disappointed fast. They were his own age, talking all at once at shouting volume and, once the guitar cases were stashed in a corner, pulled out a tennis ball and started playing catch.

Carlo could barely move his hands. He fumbled as the ball was tossed his way, dropped it, ended on his stomach retrieving it from underneath the armchair, and meekly retreated to the door. “I’ll look for some water,” was his pathetic excuse.



Mixed Reviews

Being continually nice to sponsors was becoming a trial for Sofie. She soon understood that they came in a hamper of different varieties. There were the political types: the Mayor, members of the city council, the national parliament, occasional European dignitaries, and all the ranks of officials and minor staff. These had a peculiar way of being trouble in inverse proportion to their seniority.

The really important ones were a little distant but unfailingly charming, whatever their politics. It was the minor officials, the parliamentarians no-one had heard of, the minders and Sherpas, who were a pain in the bottom of Sofie’s sparkling waters.

Then there were the long term commercial ‘partners’, who expected her undivided attention before concerts and during intervals, and were constantly inviting friends and contacts into the reserved sections for free drinks, and who thought of Sofie as an upmarket waitress or a junior member of their own corporate staff.

Even worse were the sponsors just for one event. For them, the festival was often a baffling novelty, the sponsors' reception a party but one where they either knew nobody and felt completely out of place, or one where they brought all their friends, whether or not they had the slightest interest in the concert. Many of them had never been to a live classical music event before and had no idea of the basic etiquette (like not talking, switching off their mobile phones or sitting still during the playing). They had paid for the performance so they could do as they liked! It was Sofie's job to explain the rules with great diplomacy and tact, a task often not helped by her lack of the local language.

The last group were not financial but reputation sponsors: the press. In the interval of the evening's concert (held on a stage in the same little square that she and Carlo had adopted as their *al fresco* office before the festival started) she had her hands full. The Elbe Source Philharmonic Orchestra had come over the mountains with their young, compact and charismatic conductor, Gustavo Lapequino, famous more for the signals given by his hair than his baton.

The local music critics were there, of course, as they were every night, but there were two foreigners as well; one, a Spanish blogger from a vaguely respectable online review site. He was no trouble since nobody on the staff or the team spoke Spanish. He just sipped his warm local wine with distaste, as if he had heard a substandard violinist.

The second international critic was the one giving Sofie nightmares. Norman Joostaluis wrote and podcasted for titles in London and Amsterdam. He delighted in controversy and was known as the 'shockjock of the arts'. If there was no controversy he would create it. In person he was a straggly man in middle age with bad teeth, stale odours and an unfortunate taste in purple shirts. He had a black moustache that might have been fashionable in a 1970s Western but now just drooped into his beer.

He sidled over to Sofie, the only young and attractive woman in the sponsors' reception coral and the only one with a staff badge, and leered. "Not much good, is he!" he announced with the air of a police inspector.

"Who, the soloist? I thought he was rather wonderful," Sofie argued back.

"No, that urchin conductor. The man who thinks he's a film star." Now that he had started on his favourite theme, Joostaluis was not to be stopped. "He waves, he gesticulates,

he dances. The orchestra never look at him because all they see is disco. If I want disco, I will take you out later."

"Oh, I don't think so," Sofie said firmly. She did not need to worry. Joostaluis was not listening.

"I mean, they need to know where the beat is, when to enter, when to be quieter, not that the conductor has great hips. He might as well wear swimming trunks or a thong."

Sofie looked around desperately and was grateful when one of the politicians caught her eye. "I'm sorry, sir," she mumbled, "other duties," and moved away. Suddenly the air seemed clearer. The relief was only temporary, however. She turned in time to see Joostaluis heading towards the Mayor and heard his opening words.

"What an ugly town this is," he began without waiting for an introduction. "I suppose this festival must be the only interesting thing that happens here. Such dull scenery, such unimaginative people. Do you think that is down to those years of communism or has it been like this for ever?"

The Mayor started to swell with fury but she was a politician and used to insults. She merely said to the approaching Sofie, "I think this man is drunk. No doubt the police will assist you. I suggest you call them now," and moved away like a battleship that has just sunk a tiresome frigate.



Theatrics

"Do you think we should do something?" Carlo asked Sofie at the side of the stage.

"I suppose so - what?" she shouted above the noise. "Is this artistic dissent or a riot," she shouted again as an open can of beer just missed her - at least she assumed it was beer.

At the front of the stage, AD (Achile Djurekschyk, the outgoing Artistic Director) stood hand in hand with composer, cast and production team, doing their best to smile through the hail of small missiles and the chorus of boos, as if flowers were being thrown and the demands were for encores. The composer was Pimpelbaum and he was relishing every moment of the fuss over the final performance

of his grand and grotesque opera, *Waldo The Necromancer*. As a half-eaten apple thudded against his shoulder, his grin widened in delight. "Stravinsky was just a prelude. This is so much better than *The Rite of Spring*. We are commemorating fifty years since he died and the 108th anniversary of the premiere in the best way possible - by infuriating the bourgeoisie."

This was not quite how AD saw it. "Ouch!" he replied as an iceberg lettuce bounced off his midriff. He was a sensitive soul and this was meant to be his great moment on stage at the end of the festival he had led for half a decade: the culmination of his patronage of contemporary art. He knew that new was always difficult to sell but even he was aware that Pimpelbaum's efforts were deliberately provocative.

Even then, AD understood his festival audience well enough to know that they would have forgiven the silly story, the pretentious staging, the revolting costumes, if the music had been good. It was not. It was dull, repetitive, grating and pointlessly difficult to sing.

"Maybe I should just kill the lights," Carlo ventured.

"You could but will that be enough. And how do we get them," Sofie waved at the embattled cast, "out of here?"

"They seem to have their own ideas about that," noted Carlo as the singers began to desert the production team and leave the stage with undignified haste. The orchestra, keen to protect their instruments and not in the least caring about Pimpelbaum after the agonies he had put them through, were long gone.

"Shall I?" asked Carlo again.

"Go on," said Sofie but then held him back as the whole scene changed instantly and dramatically.

AD had had enough of being pelted with vegetables for the composer's incompetence. In possibly the most decisive act of his life, he caught a flying egg with one hand, a tomato with the other, and smashed them both over Pimpelbaum's head, then wiped his hands slowly down Pimpelbaum's jacket. The derision turned to delight. AD went from zero to hero with one gesture.

Fierce Oxana, watching from the back of the crowd, wondered what the penalties were for justified assault; making a festive omelette on a tiresome Pimpelbaum.



Finale

The last concert of the year was finished, the musicians were packing up and already the outdoor venues were looking like ghostly skeletons. Overnight the big trucks of the infrastructure companies would move in and the canopies, struts, seats and scaffolding would be dismantled by teams of men who knew their job - to erect and undo - but cared nothing for what happened in between. At first light the city's street cleaners would take over, soldier ants removing anything in their path. By the time Sofie and Carlo walked to the festival office in the late morning there would be barely a trace of the month's excitements, just a few limp banners advertising wonders that were now only to be found on the internet. So much instant history.

For the staff and the remaining performers, though, there was one last engagement. The last of the audience were on their way home at 10pm after the fireworks. At 11 their entertainers gathered in Bar Europa Sitienti for the final fling: the legendary festival staff party.

There was only one rule for the night; whatever anyone did during the party might not be forgotten but it must never be mentioned again. If news leaked, or if there were giggles around the office coffee machine the following week, the culprits would join the staff no presents list, which was much more frightening than its title suggested.

Sofie and Carlo were among the last to arrive, since their duties had been to wait around until all the sponsors had gone and the musicians had seen off the final well-wishers and general hangers-on. Only the players themselves and their actual partners were allowed to the party: no agents, students, old friends, or journalists. This party was intended to have no lingering consequences.

That was the intention, at least.

An hour after midnight, Sofie had had enough. Exhaustion was catching up faster than alcohol could outrun it. The only thing that had kept her there that long was the sight of fierce Oxana bopping frantically to 1990s techno, a throwback to the administrator's days as a teen metallic red-head in newly liberated Eastern Europe. Sofie could hardly

blame her boss for wanting to get some release. Nobody on the team had been faced with so many crises and fought so furiously to overcome them. Still, her dancing style, somewhere between disco ecstasy and the funky chicken, was something to behold.

The sight of Carlo joining in with not much less abandon or more style was proof of something - Sofie was too tired to work out what. She felt a tap on her shoulder and half turned to find AD, Achile Djurekschyk, grinning.

"Perhaps this dancing is not for you?" he suggested.

"You are so right."

He nodded. "Nor for me." He paused and they watched the ludicrous spectacle for a moment longer.

"I think I'm going home now," Sofie decided.

"And me." AD took her by the arm. "Let's go together. I'll walk you home, at least some of the way."

They left. Outside, the summer night was clear and, after all the noise of the festival fireworks and the party, the nocturnal city seemed a haven of civilised quiet. They walked the empty streets without hurrying, relishing the sense of a task completed, a jungle left behind.

After a while AD said, "I'm leaving tomorrow, going South."

"So soon?"

"No point in hanging around. There's nothing more for me here."

"You're going to lie on a beach and draw hearts in the sand?"

"For a few days, yes. But after that... What are you going to do - stay and prop Oxana up or look for a job around the Baltic?"

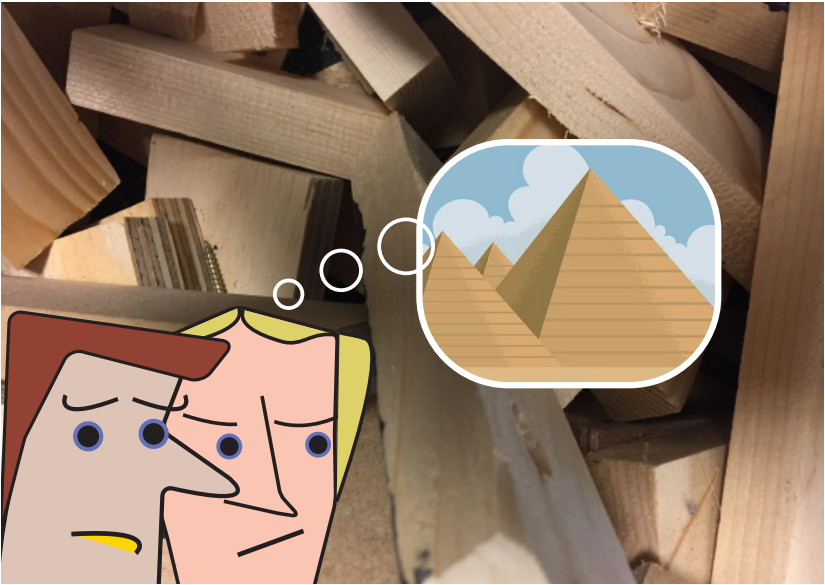
"Not Oxana." Sofie laughed, "After tonight I can leave that to Carlo. I don't know. I think I might travel, do some sort of eco-project or post-grad course."

AD walked in silence, then, looking down a side street towards the river, said, "I think I have the perfect island."

"For what?"

"For life, the view, a terrace, the wine - a festival." He stopped, turned and smiled. "Want to join me?"

FINIS



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Somewhere in Europe a festival is underway. Every day brings a crisis. Somehow the big people in charge only ever arrive at the end. Only the two young interns, Sofie and Carlo, stand between triumph and disaster.

Sofie and Carlo arrived before COVID, helped their festival through it, and came out the other side.

James Eno is a writer who has had two novels published so far: *Seeking The Spoils* and *Shadow On The Island*. In another incarnation he is well-known as a music journalist and poet, living in Scotland.



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