

AVGUST DEMŠAR

## **EUROPE**

### SYNOPSIS

In the prologue to Avgust Demšar's novel *Europe*, we follow two travellers as they wander from Lisbon's meticulously planned Baixa district into the historic neighbourhood of Alfama. Seeking an authentic experience away from the glossy surface of Baixa, the travellers make their way into Alfama. Hungry, they stumble into a simple, dimly lit tavern that seems untouched by time. They are greeted by the elderly owner, a former fado singer who has traded the stage for this small establishment, though the spirit of fado – the haunting music rooted in Portuguese feelings of "saudade", a deep, bittersweet longing – still softly fills the room. The travellers, initially hesitant, settle in, charmed by the sense of history and nostalgia. As they finish, the woman suggests taking a photo outside. Later, in Munich, the woman realizes the photo isn't perfect, but it holds sentimental value. She plans to send a copy back to Lisbon, fulfilling a promise to the owner, who lovingly displays it on her tavern wall – a small gesture that brings joy to her quiet, nostalgic life in Alfama. However, the photo, pinned and forgotten, may one day bring unforeseen trouble.

The introductory chapter portrays a nostalgic snapshot of Slovenia, more precisely of Ljubljana's past, when a young girl plays a game of hide-and-seek with neighbourhood children near the iconic Trnovo Bridge. As the girl searches, she is misled by her friend, who falsely suggests a hiding spot under the bridge. Distracted, the girl turns to find the other children rushing to touch the goal tree, winning the game. In the end, she is left humiliated and hurt by her friend's betrayal, which deepens her sense of isolation and sadness amidst the childhood game. However, the next chapter completely changes the scenery, as we are transported to the present moment – a rainy September evening, when three scientists travel to Maribor, Slovenia, for a conference. Through heavy rain and darkness, they get glimpses of the city's industrial and historic areas as their driver reassures them about the weather. They arrive at a modest guesthouse, where they plan to rest after the long journey, lulled by the sound of rain on the roof.

The first part of the book starts after the two short initial chapters, when we are rushed to the bustling scene in a hotel lobby where an international scientific conference, *Europe Now*, is set to begin. An elegant man inquires about the location of the evening gala dinner, only to be redirected to Nataša Jenko, a composed and experienced event organizer. Inside the conference hall, journalists and photographers prepare for the opening. Among the organizing staff, Darka Logar, known as "Pika", with her distinct orange hair, efficiently handles issues and soothes any arising chaos, earning respect from her colleagues. The conference begins with welcome speeches from the institute's director and local officials, followed by a keynote from Professor Kevin Douglas, a Canadian scholar. Douglas captivates the audience with personal anecdotes and insights on Europe from an outsider's perspective, culminating in an engaging, well-received talk that sets an optimistic tone for the event. Other presentations range from highly captivating to more technical and formal, concluding the morning session. The conference attendees then enjoy a delightful lunch in a well-appointed hotel restaurant, featuring a menu of hearty dishes.

The chapter titled *Danse macabre* abruptly ends the uplifting atmosphere of the previous events, because we start following an event late at night, when in a desolate Maribor street, a parked car watches as guests leave a motel after a gathering. One guest, in a tracksuit, goes for a jog, but the car follows. On a nearby bridge, the car accelerates and deliberately hits the jogger, violently ending their life in a chilling, calculated act. Later, on a foggy Maribor morning, a retired factory

worker fishing by the Drava River reels in an unexpected “catch” – a human corpse caught on his hook. Shocked but composed, he pulls the body to the shallows without touching it and promptly calls the police. To steady his nerves, he cracks open a beer and smokes, staring at the grim discovery as dawn breaks, thus bringing us to the second part of the novel.

In the fifth chapter detective Marko Breznik is called to investigate a reported drowning in the Drava River near Maribor. Recently back from his honeymoon, Breznik, along with his colleagues, arrives at the scene. A fisherman discovered the body of a man, approximately 60 years old, dressed in a dark tracksuit. Upon closer inspection, Breznik notices a suspicious, large wound behind the man’s ear, prompting him to call his superior for further investigation. During the conference concern arises when Professor Douglas fails to appear at scheduled sessions. Conference organizer Ema Žnidaršič, along with her team, attempts to locate him. After discovering that Douglas has not left his motel room and his whereabouts are unknown, they pressure the motel staff to open his room. Their search intensifies as they prepare to confront what might have happened to the professor. Meanwhile, inspector Martin Vrenko arrives at the city morgue. He and his colleague, Marko Breznik, examine the body of an unidentified man found with unusual injuries. The corpse shows signs of significant trauma, including broken legs and a head wound, possibly caused by a car accident or a fall from height. However, additional bruising in the groin area, which could not have occurred with the other injuries, raises suspicions. The forensic pathologist and a forensic criminalist analyse the body and its soaked clothing. The criminalist notes that the victim’s undergarments bear American brands not sold locally, hinting he might be a foreigner, potentially complicating the investigation. Vrenko suspects they are dealing with a murder rather than an accident, despite hoping otherwise. He braces for the challenges ahead, particularly if the victim turns out to be an American citizen.

On Saturday afternoon, the investigators identify the drowning victim as Professor Kevin Douglas. Nataša Jenko and Darka Logar, both from the conference, confirm his identity and recount his last known movements, noting he was last seen returning to his motel after a group dinner on Friday night. During questioning, the investigators meet Ema Žnidaršič, the conference organizer, and Vlasta Wolf, her aloof colleague. The officers privately form impressions: Breznik finds Darka competent and likable, Ema sympathetic, Vlasta unappealing, and does not seem to form an opinion about Nataša. Ivana notices Vlasta’s insecurity and sees Ema’s grief as genuine. While Vrenko keeps his thoughts to himself, he senses something unusual, hinting at deeper layers to the case yet to be uncovered. Nataša Jenko and Darka Logar provide details about Douglas's last movements: Douglas arrived in Maribor on Thursday evening, attended a lively dinner with colleagues, and was last seen returning to his motel around midnight. The investigators learn that Douglas was an avid runner and planned to continue his routine in Maribor. The police suspect a local murderer, doubting that a foreigner would commit the crime without leaving traces. They review seating and transportation arrangements, finding no obvious suspects among the conference attendees. Vrenko and Breznik note unusual behavior from the women, suggesting possible hidden motives or connections. The tenth chapter concludes with the investigators feeling that there are deeper layers to the case that need to be uncovered, while leaving us with a scan of the forensic report.

The following chapter portrays a series of coincidental and interconnected events that lead to a critical error in the investigation of a murder case. Marko Breznik receives a forensic report marked as "urgent" and begins reading it while eating a sandwich, inadvertently leaving adhesive residue on the pages. This causes two pages of the report to stick together. Ivana Premk, distracted due to her daughter’s illness, later reads the report but misses the critical information on the second

page because the pages are stuck. Despite this oversight, the narrative emphasizes that even without this mistake, preventing the subsequent murder would have been unlikely. The chapter highlights how small, seemingly mundane actions and coincidences can have far-reaching implications in a high-stakes investigation.

The *Europe Today* conference ends on a note after the hit-and-run death of Professor Kevin Douglas, suspected by police to be deliberate. Despite investigations and interviews with Douglas's sister, who confirms he had no enemies or connections in the region, no leads emerge. A public appeal brings forward Julka Sever, who saw a suspiciously parked car that night, but her vague account offers little help. On September the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Inspector Vrenko and his team watch helplessly as the conference attendees, including the likely murderer, disperse, frustrated by their inability to act. Investigators determined the time of death – between 1:00 and 1:30 AM on September the 16<sup>th</sup> – based on Julka Sever's account. However, establishing alibis proved difficult, as most conference attendees lacked verifiable accounts of their whereabouts. Darka Logar's damaged Mazda MX-5 initially raised suspicion, as its dents matched the height of the impact on Douglas's body. Yet, witnesses confirmed the damage was old, and no forensic evidence linked the car to the crime, as critical clues were compromised by weather and cleanup activities shortly after the incident. Theories of accidental death were undermined by forensic details. Douglas wore reflective athletic clothing, making him highly visible, and the incident occurred on a sidewalk separated from the road, pointing to deliberate action. An apparent anomaly in the time displayed on his watch was resolved when investigators accounted for the time zone difference, matching his known time of death. Stones found in his shoes confirmed his path but provided no new leads. While some questions were answered, the case stalled. A section of the forensic report remained unexamined due to procedural oversights, leaving a potential key detail overlooked. Despite methodical efforts, the investigation struggled to move forward, underscoring the difficulty of resolving such a complex case.

In the next chapters, detectives interview Nataša Jenko, who provides little helpful information about Kevin Douglas, recalling only an inquiry from a guest, Hrvoje Ujčić, about dinner plans. She appears professional and composed, though somewhat reserved in demeanor. While outwardly cooperative and polite, Nataša's interactions suggest a tendency to maintain emotional distance, perhaps indicating a cautious or self-contained nature. Her vegetarian lifestyle and avoidance of extravagance reveal personal choices rooted in discipline and self-awareness. The detectives find Nataša generally unremarkable, despite her organizational competence. Subsequent interviews with other attendees similarly reveal Douglas as a well-liked, modest academic with no apparent enemies or conflicts, leaving the investigators without leads. Overall, the leads remain tenuous. The detectives then finally meet Hrvoje Ujčić, a Croatian conference attendee, and question him about his activities during the day. Ujčić explains that he left the conference briefly to look for Tamiflu and later attended the gala dinner, where he unsuccessfully tried to charm secretary Pika. Meanwhile, Martin Vrenko becomes intrigued by the hotel's menu, particularly the meals served on the first day of the conference, hinting at a potential lead, which opens the third part of the book.

Darka, Vlasta, and Tatiana meet at a jazz club in Maribor to chat about life and plan their New Year's celebration. Vlasta, usually reserved and somewhat snobbish, surprises the others by suggesting a traditional hotel-style New Year's Eve celebration. While Tatiana is enthusiastic about the idea, Pika – a nickname used for Darka – is initially taken aback but eventually agrees, viewing it as an unusual experience. The conversation unfolds in a relaxed atmosphere with drinks, casual observations and laughter among the three women. Meanwhile, inspector Martin

Vrenko spends the morning of New Year's Eve in a smoky Maribor café, reading a serialized novel in the newspaper while avoiding his usual social circle. Despite the unresolved murder case weighing on him, he decides to embrace the festive spirit, planning a quiet New Year's Eve at home with his wife Mojca and visiting friends. He reflects on his colleagues' plans – Ivana celebrating with family and Marko at a lively spa hotel dinner – and feels relieved to avoid such gatherings. Ironically, the narrative hints that Vrenko may unexpectedly find himself at one of these typical New Year's Eve celebrations, despite his firm intention to steer clear of them.

In the next, twenty-second chapter, we meet Luka Kocjančič, a 56-year-old head waiter at a hotel hosting a lively New Year's Eve party. The setting is described in detail, from the elegant hallway outside the banquet hall to the bustling activity of guests and staff. Luka is depicted as a dedicated and respected professional. As he takes a break to smoke on the hotel's fire escape, Luka reflects on his long career, his struggle to quit smoking, and his minor health issues. However, his moment of contemplation takes a grim turn when he feels a sharp pain in his chest. Before he can fully process the sensation, he collapses and dies. A steak knife is found lodged in his back, indicating he was murdered. The chapter ends with a chilling image of Luka lying lifeless on the metal staircase, still holding his cigarette. Meanwhile, Martin Vrenko is enjoying a relaxed New Year's Eve at home with his wife Mojca and their friends. The evening is lighthearted, filled with laughter, wine, and homemade treats. However, the festive mood is interrupted when Vrenko receives a phone call from his colleague, Marko Breznik, who is attending a New Year's Eve celebration at a hotel.

Marko informs Vrenko about a murder at the hotel: a waiter has been found stabbed in the heart on the fire escape, with further signs of violence. Initially dismissive because the case falls outside his jurisdiction, Vrenko becomes intrigued when Marko mentions two individuals at the hotel who are connected to an unresolved case involving the murder of Canadian professor Douglas. Realizing the potential link between the cases, Vrenko decides to join the investigation. Accompanied by a police driver, he leaves Maribor for the hotel, reflecting on the festive atmosphere around him and the significance of this New Year's Eve, which marks not only the arrival of 2007 but also Slovenia's transition to the euro currency. Vrenko meets with local police officers, including his colleague Miloš, who updates him on the case. Vrenko then meets a group of women in the hotel's dining area, including Darka, Vlasta, Tatiana and Nataša. While conversing with them, Vrenko senses underlying tensions while noticing how his colleague avoided talking to Nataša Jenko and instead turned his attention to the charming secretary Darka. Suspicion turns to the guests, but a key piece of forensic evidence – injuries to the victim's genital area – suggests a connection to a previous case. A mix-up in reviewing the forensic report leads to a delay in recognizing this clue. The team takes responsibility for the oversight, promising to correct it and report their findings to their superiors.

In the next chapter, the investigator Ivana Premk, is working late at night at home after taking on new responsibilities at the police station. She uses Interpol's online database to investigate unusual injuries in the genital area, which might be connected to sexual crimes. She filters the results by various parameters and, after examining thousands of cases, discovers a case involving a Slovenian man named Marino Meško, who was murdered in Lisbon in 1998. The case had been previously solved, but the details about the injuries to his genitals had never been fully explained. Ivana continues her investigation and uncovers that the victim's widow, Mira Meško, was also a former director of an institute. She confirms that Mira Meško and the widow are the same person, finally making a significant breakthrough in her case. The chapter ends with Ivana feeling satisfied with her progress, taking a moment to relax with a beer before continuing her work.

They start with the questioning of Mira Meško. She said that in 1998 she accompanied her husband, Marin, to a conference in Lisbon. During the day, he attended the conference while she wandered the city. One afternoon, while exploring the Alfama district, she entered a small, rustic tavern, where she saw a photograph on the wall of Marin with a woman named Gretchen, with whom he had previously had an affair. The photo, taken in September 1997, showed the two of them happily posing together, disproving Marin's claims that their relationship had ended. Mira had believed Marin when he promised he was done with Gretchen, but this photo shattered that trust. Mira Meško recounts a traumatic event from eight years earlier in Lisbon, when her husband, Marin, was attacked and murdered. After discovering a photograph of Marin with his former lover, Gretchen, Mira was consumed with anger and waited for him to return to the hotel. When Marin arrived, two assailants attacked him outside the hotel, beating and robbing him. Mira witnessed the assault from her window and rushed outside to find him dead.

The investigators are shocked by her confession, especially since they are aware of the cause of Marin's death – a blow to the back of his head. Mira's actions remain ambiguous, as she cannot fully recall the details, and her admission of kicking him remains unexplained. The chapter raises unsettling questions. Could Mira, despite her apparent remorse and physical frailty, have been involved in the recent murders that bear similar injuries to Marin's? Inspector Martin Vrenko visits Mira Meško again to investigate who might have known about her confession regarding the kicking. Mira recalls a conversation she had three years ago at a New Year's gathering, where she shared her secret with two women, Ema and Darka. However, she firmly denies that they would have told anyone else. Vrenko is skeptical of her certainty, as her response seems more driven by personal belief than rational thought. The investigation reveals that others at the event could have overheard the conversation.

Martin Vrenko, while reading the novel *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, suddenly recalls the term *danse macabre* (the dance of death) and connects it to a fresco he once saw in Hrastovlje. Vrenko reflects on the symbolism of life and death, and in a moment of realization, he understands the reason behind the deaths of Kevin Douglas and Luka Kocjančič, and who is responsible for their murders. His subconscious has finally connected the dots, and he begins to sense the truth behind the crimes. Despite the lack of clear motives or connections between the victims, Vrenko proposes a different approach to the investigation. He introduces the concept of a "timeline" and suggests that the key to understanding the murders might lie not in the immediate past but in events from a much earlier period. Martin Vrenko reveals that he has discovered important clues related to the murders of Kevin Douglas and Luka Kocjančič. However, he is not yet willing to share the full details with his colleagues, Ivana and Marko. Instead, he gives them a series of cryptic notes he has made, suggesting that certain individuals are lying or hiding something. One of these clues involves a seemingly irrelevant detail about a minestrone soup recipe from a hotel. Despite this odd diversion, the team is left to piece together the significance of these observations, though Ivana finds it all quite perplexing.

Vrenko is preparing a trap to confirm his theory, though he lacks direct evidence to present in court. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of January, the team questions Darka, Ema, Vlasta, Tatiana and Nataša. The conversation is meant to mimic the behavior of the victims, Kevin Douglas and Luka Kocjančič, in hopes of triggering a reaction from one of the women. While Marko is frustrated with the process, Ivana is puzzled by Vrenko's cryptic actions and words. Vrenko follows a carefully planned route home, while his team of police officers watches over him, ensuring his safety in case of an attack. The plan is a precautionary measure to lure a potential attacker into a trap, based on the previous attempts on Kevin Douglas' life. Vrenko notices nothing unusual during his walk, but after reaching

his home, he experiences a moment of unease, which only fades once he is safely inside. The team, including Ivana and Marko, is positioned around his house to ensure everything goes as planned. After the operation, Vrenko debriefs his team and feels a sense of disappointment, as no one attempted to harm him. However, he receives a letter the morning after the failed operation. The letter is from Nataša Jenko. She expresses her anger at his perceived condescension towards her, recounts her experiences of humiliation, and explains her motivations for the murders. She describes how years of being ignored and mistreated led to her violent actions. Nataša justifies her crimes, stating that they were the result of long-standing emotional abuse, starting when she was just a little girl. The first victim, Douglas, made her feel invisible and insignificant. His lack of recognition and attention exacerbated her feelings of rejection, culminating in a decision to kill him after a particularly humiliating experience at a conference. The second victim, a waiter, represented the final straw. His failure to provide her a glass of water, coupled with the perceived indifference and isolation she felt at the dinner, pushed her over the edge. The waiter's actions symbolized the broader pattern of disregard and exclusion she experienced, leading her to kill him impulsively as an act of rebellion against the perceived injustices of her life.

In chapter thirty-six, Nataša eventually reveals how she used a car belonging to her aunt to dispose of Douglas's body. The investigation uncovers physical evidence linking her to the crime, such as traces of blood and fibers in her car. Nataša's behavior and lies stem from her intense feelings of humiliation and frustration over being overlooked at the conference. Marko Breznik still struggles to understand the motives behind Nataša Jenko's actions. Thus, the investigation delves into psychological analysis, focusing on the concept of the "black box," where a person's internal perceptions and past trauma influence their responses to external stimuli. Nataša's behavior is examined in light of psychological theories, suggesting that her violent actions might be rooted in unresolved childhood trauma and feelings of social exclusion. Her actions, including the brutal killing of her victims, are linked to a deep, repressed desire for revenge against the male figures who never desired her. The passage explores the complexities of her psyche, revealing how years of emotional neglect and mistreatment culminated in her violent outburst.

In the final chapter, Ivana Premk and Marko Breznik, two criminal investigators, discuss the events surrounding their superior, Martin Vrenko, and the case involving Nataša Jenko. Ivana speculates that Vrenko might have anticipated the failure of his trap for Nataša and that the entire investigation was part of a larger psychological game. She suggests that Vrenko's real message to Nataša was a subtle warning. Ivana also reflects on how, despite everything, Nataša has finally achieved what she always wanted: being at the center of attention. As they leave the police station, the cold winter evening contrasts with the warm complexity of the case's resolution.