

FICTION/PROSE

CRIME NOVEL

BESTSELLING SLOVENIAN CRIME AUTHOR

THE CHURCH

Written by: **Avgust Demšar**

The Church is Demšar's tenth crime novel. The stories are typical of the "whodunnit" crime genre, written in the same style as Demšar's previous work. However, the story itself is somewhat more complex. There are plenty of side stories where the author focuses on the relationships between the mainstay characters known from his previous novels and their characterisation. The rising action that triggers further events is the murder of Bishop Ignac Knez while on a pilgrimage to Ptujška Gora (a popular pilgrimage site). The investigation that follows includes combing through the financial machinations of the Maribor archdiocese, the individualistic political endeavours of Levstek the prosecutor, the tension between him and police chief Kralj, and the personal motives of several individuals who are not connected to the church. This novel will be followed by two others, *Tycoon* and *Estonia*. The set ups and characters carrying the action in the second and third parts are already present in the first novel, although in more minor roles. Nonetheless, each book will be a stand-alone story.



Format: 14.8 x 21cm, black and white print, paperback

No. of pages: 608



Avgust Demšar comes from Maribor and writes exclusively crime novels. Stories are put in a real surroundings of Maribor and in real present time. They are based on detection, secret clues and hints, which are at reader's disposal all the time, so that he can compete with main heroes and even tries to solve the problem before them. The author is critical towards social differences, impatience, homophobia and xenophobia. Avgust Demšar is a pseudonym. The author has decided for it because it somehow belongs to the genre he is practising.

Contact: **Zala Stanonik**
Slovenia
zala@zalozba-pivec.com

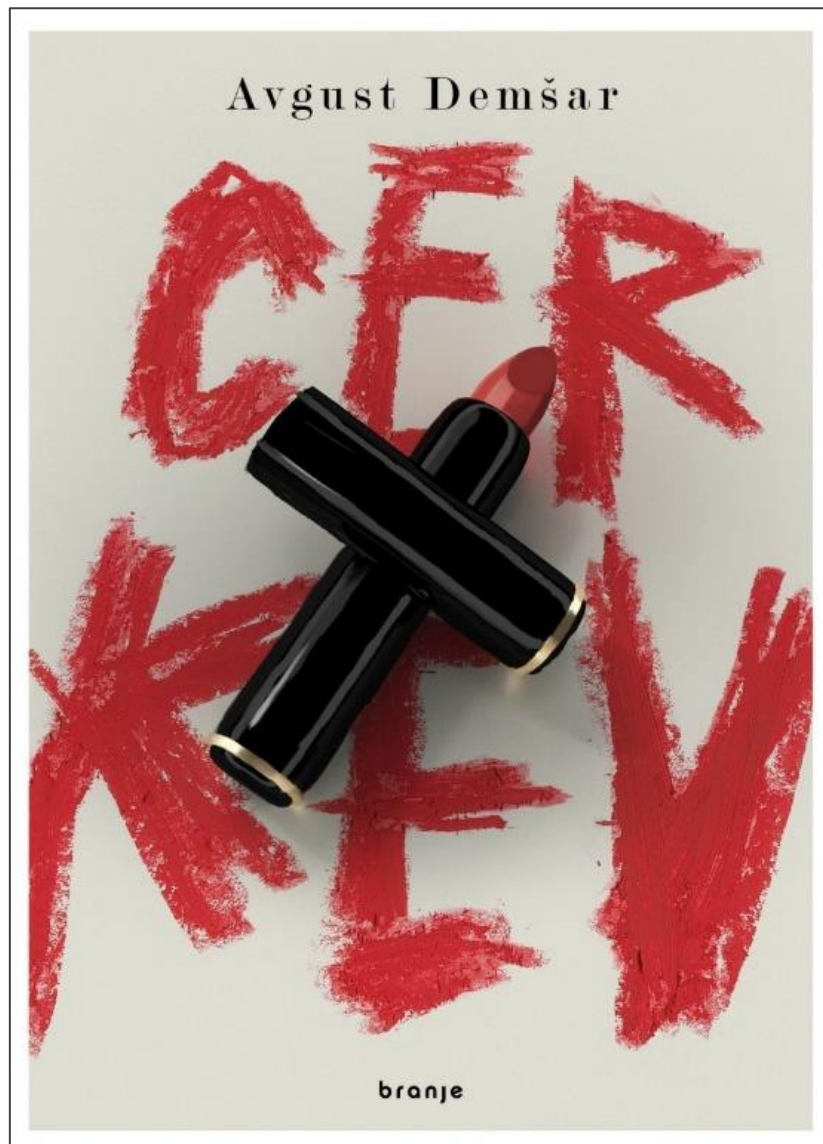
Založba Pivec d.o.o., Na Gorci 20, 2000 Maribor,
+386 2 250 08 28, +386 41 769 706

Reading Sample

Avgust Demšar

THE CHURCH

(Sample translation)



1

Sunday, 9 February – Friday, 14 February 2020

Oh, happy day

Sunday, 9 February, 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.

Sunday, the ninth of February, 2020, was a big day for Father Tomaž Ocvirk. On the one hand, he felt as though he were on the rack at the hands of the Inquisition at the point where his first vertebrae were beginning to crack, while on the other hand he felt blissful, as though he had just entered the gates of heaven and was overwhelmed by a sense of pure joy that washed over him, intermingled with the realisation that the Garden of Eden, as one of the pillars of Christianity, really existed. It's not that he had any doubts, his faith was as solid as the walls around the church, but, well, people are weak and—especially if they are concerned about their reputation—are also disbelieving deep down in their souls.

Today was the day for which Father Ocvirk had been preparing, planning, organising, for which he had been making arrangements and for which he had been sending intercessory prayers *up there* for at least a year, if not more. He had succeeded in getting Bishop Ignac Knez to offer a Holy Mass here, in his church, in his parish, on this Sunday in February.

He was on the rack due to the organisation of the event. In fact, he had had the help of chaplains, fellow priests and many parishioners; from the members of the parish pastoral council, the caretaker and altar boys down to the lady who decorates the church and its premises. However, the responsibility was his and his alone. Leading mass, devising the sermon, listening compassionately in the confessional and, if necessary, also sweeping the church; none of which was a big deal to Father Ocvirk. However, organising a gathering of pilgrims with not just any man, but a kind of ecclesiastical Bono Vox (yes, Tomaž Ocvirk was not an antiquated old priest, instead enjoying contemporary rock music and knowing a thing or two about it), was quite a different story altogether. This was work more suited to a shrewd mega-event planner, not to the contemplations of a devoted priest.

At that moment, just past noon, Father Ocvirk was standing with one foot already in heaven and the rack had vanished into thin air. As soon as the event that he had feared so greatly began, he realised that his fear had been exaggerated and unwarranted. Just like in the tale he had used in a previous sermon, he thought, in which he compared the fear of complete surrender to Jesus Christ to fear *which is hollow and around it there is nothing*.

At exactly nine o'clock in the morning, he successfully received Monsignor Bishop Knez, who turned out to be a modest and easy-going guest and an excellent conversationalist. He had just finished offering Holy Mass and now they were off to lunch. The congregation greeted them enthusiastically. Now, as he walked up the stairs alongside the bishop, Father Ocvirk was pacified, care-free, and the only thing that gnawed at him was hunger

and the anticipation of a homemade beef consommé which had been prepared for them in the tavern opposite the church.

A virtue of the faithful is their care for the vulnerable, poor, disabled and those in need. This is one of the most important tasks bestowed on them by God, which is why they like to dedicate themselves to this, although some more sincerely than others.

“Did you see how well I did with those poor people,” they say when they do a good deed, covering up their lack of inner motivation for their actions.

Bishop Knez didn't have this problem, his heart was wide open and his eyes always alert. They were quick to notice people who were feeble, crippled, handicapped, adults and especially children, those with chronic illnesses, those who were deaf, blind, old, homeless, those with mental handicaps and so on, whatever they were called today.

As soon as the bishop left the church where the excited crowd had gathered to see him, he caught sight of a dishevelled, unshaven man with an ugly scab on his nose. Disregarding the ruddy cheeks and merry smiles, he walked straight over to the man, offered him his hand and noticed a hint of gratitude in his bewildered eyes. The bishop's heart bled for him. He would have liked to hand him some money, if only he knew how to. It wasn't difficult in missions, but during church ceremonies where the financial flow moved in the opposite direction during the collection, he didn't know how to realise these aspirations of his. He would send his driver to the man later.

Next, he spotted a young man. Like the homeless person by the door, he was also laying low in the background. He had barely noticed him. He was more diminutive in size, had skin like parchment, fine, straight and thinning hair and a vacant look. Unlike the foul-smelling homeless man, he was wearing decent clothes; it was something else that made him stand out. The man was very fat. Not just heavysset, there were many like that around, his condition must be pathological. Most of his soft flab was piled onto his waist, hips and thighs. His prominent double-chin and facial skin glistened with sweat. The bishop reached out his hand towards him, which was not an easy task, he had to push between two women who were standing in front of the man. The two women were pushing their way forward, they could sense that the bishop's interest was not aimed at them, and they became disgruntled. The bishop felt bad for them, but he did not want to give up. Naturally, everyone received an equal share of the bishop's attention, only that some received it a little earlier than others. He managed to force his hand between their coats and then someone pushed a dead fish into his hand. He felt something cold, wet and flaccid. The bishop began to feel uneasy. Then the dead fish came to life and grabbed hold of him. The bishop responded, he also shook the man's hand, gave him a smile, then pulled his hand back, wriggling out of his grasp just a little too quickly. The moistness, coldness and limpness, as well as the vibrations of the touch, had had an effect on him. He felt a sudden, unwanted desire, perceived it in time, felt ashamed and reproached himself. This all took place in a mere tenth of a second. At the very last moment, he stopped himself from immediately wiping his hand on his vestments. If he had inadvertently done so, he wouldn't have been able to forgive himself. All he hoped was that the man had not noticed what he had intended to do. The procession moved on.

At the foot of the steps, the bishop approached an elderly couple. The grey-haired woman, she must have been almost eighty, was stood next to her husband, who was in a wheelchair, and her gaze was aimed straight into the bishop's eyes. In her look he felt her hope, faith and a plea for help. And there was something else that caught his attention: he recognised the woman. Where to place her, he did not know, most probably one of the parishioners from when he was still a parish priest. He put on an expression of recognition and nodded to the old woman.

She appeared to be sprightly and healthy, to which her clothing, a fine coat, neat hair and the jewellery around her neck all contributed. If anything, this woman required little consolation, it was her husband who looked as though he needed more help and intercessory prayer to God. The bishop lowered his gaze. The man was sitting motionlessly, hunched over in a wheelchair. He was wrapped in a grey woollen blanket covered in images of stags, which—the bishop then realised—were not actually stags, but, judging from their antlers, moose or some northern animal. He was older than his wife, it was difficult to tell exactly, but he was definitely well into his eighties. On his neck he had a bandage with a plastic plug that made a slight whistling sound. The bishop bent down towards him and got a whiff of the smell of human feces. He looked at the old man benevolently, stroked his cheek, welcomed his saliva infected with god-only-knows-what-kind-of-bacteria on his hand (as penance for his previous poor behaviour) and went to make the sign of the cross on his forehead. That is when it happened. The man stirred and showed that he was, in spite of his helpless appearance, aware of his surroundings. He looked at the priest, tensed his neck with obvious difficulty and knocked the bishop's hand away with his head. While doing so he grimaced and let out a gargling sound. He spat from his toothless mouth, but it fell only on him, some of the saliva running down the moose's antlers and head, the gargling lost in the overall drone of the surrounding eucharistic noise.

The bishop was not offended by the unfavourable reaction. He pulled back his hand, yielded to the old man's wishes, looked at the woman, saw embarrassment in her eyes, smiled at her, signed a cross on her and felt just how enthusiastically she presented her forehead. The local priest intervened in the proceedings and moved the procession forward. After all, they had to keep to their schedule.

A special room had been allotted to the prominent guest in the tavern and where they were greeted by a table set for twelve. The biblical number was not planned, which Ocvirk particularly enjoyed. He saw this as a sign that everything would go well.

"The wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb," he chirped to one of the priests who had accompanied him on his way to the tavern.

"Revelation, twenty-one, fourteen," he replied all aglow. It was incredibly lucky that he was able to match his colleague's biblical knowledge. It was pure luck that the bishop had mentioned one of the rare quotes that he knew, he always used it in his sermons when he stumbled upon a mention of biblical numbers.

In addition to the bishop and the local priest, four other clergymen had been invited to lunch. Two because they had helped with the preparations, the third had been delegated by the archbishop of Maribor, who due to a previous engagement—at least that is what the official and surprisingly cold e-mail from the office of the Maribor archdiocese had read—was unable to personally attend the event. The fourth was an unknown grey-haired man in his mid-sixties wearing a brown monastic habit with a hood and a Carinthian accent. Father Ocvirk found him to be utterly enigmatic, and he was here on the express wishes of the guest. He seemed to be dusty, rusty and lacking in eucharistic stamina. For him to be some sort of genius theological thinker that studies the secrets of God did not seem very likely to him. It was more probable that they kept him stashed away somewhere because he kept getting into trouble.

Over the course of the day, and later even more so, Ocvirk began to grasp how shameful his thoughts were and reproached himself for thinking them. If anything, a Roman Catholic priest cannot allow himself to fall into the grip of any of the deadly sins. Luckily, Ocvirk kept them successfully at bay. He knew no vanity, was never greedy, lust was foreign to him, as was sloth. Here and there, like today, he looked forward to a good meal, but this was far from gluttony. He had learnt a long time ago how to reign in the odd bout of anger that he had been prone to in his youth, while envy had never been an issue. Until now.

The dusty old priest was a close acquaintance of the bishop. They were on a first-name basis, the priest called the bishop *Igo*, the bishop called him *Jaka*. They had chatted before Mass in the vestry in which they had made it clear to Ocvirk that he was not wanted there. But this was not envy, Father Tomaž Ocvirk tried to convince himself, maybe just a little jealousy.

In addition to the six spiritual shepherds, at the table were seated the bishop's driver and two of the church laywomen who were most ardently active in the preparation of the visit, both in their late sixties. To be able to gaze into the face of the bishop while he chewed on a piece of pork roast was their reward for months of selfless work.

The last three places were taken up by people whose presence had been arranged by the local parish priest on his own initiative, which was the only thing he had not consulted the high-ranking guest about and had conceded to his wishes. Needless to say, they never spoke about these three guests, nor about the others; however, although many a thing is not said out loud within the four walls of the church, everyone knows the goings on. They were big shots, one kind or another. Bishop Knez would most probably not approve of these kinds of *indulgences*, although he would most probably understand them. Sometimes, certain things are simply inevitable.

The first of the trio, sitting to the left of the parish priest, was the mayor of the municipality in which the village of Ptujška Gora belonged. He had invited himself to the lunch and the parish priest couldn't think of a way to dissuade him, and, what is more, the roads around the village were scheduled to be repaired next year, which would improve accessibility to his church. One more chair, give or take, thought the priest, the room was large enough, and the cost was negligible. The set lunch only cost twelve euros per person,

all the drinks being on the house. In comparison with the cost of the asphalt leading to the cemetery, it was less than nothing.

The other important guest was the state secretary at the ministry of infrastructure. Two years ago, she married into their village, which they were glad of, this was promising news for the parish. As she worked in Ljubljana, she didn't spend much time in her local village, so the parish priest hadn't yet been able to form an opinion of her. Her too tight and too short orange dress and her behaviour full of affectations did, as yet, not promise much. Her presence had been arranged by the president of the political party.

The last among the notable guests needed no introduction. Štefan Matjašič was a businessman, the owner of countless properties, a member of management boards, supervisory councils, part of the established Slovenian jet set, lover of the media, frequent participant at political and business roundtables on television and (unfortunately) also the occasional focus of tabloids. According to mainly the female population, forty-eight-year-old Štefan Matjašič was an incredibly charming man, to others he was just an ordinary tycoon. His presence at the lunch was not arranged from outside; on the contrary, Father Ocvirk himself had invited him. When he was setting up the visit, he found out that Matjašič's father and Bishop Knez knew each other. He took advantage of this, as he had wanted to invite someone who the bishop knew into the circle of people who would be socialising with the guest of honour. In doing so, his intention was to make the event more personal, relaxed and comfortable. The bishop had lived abroad for several years, and coming back to your homeland is a more pleasant affair when you are surrounded by familiar faces; that was Ocvirk's logic. At the same time, he would be killing two birds with one stone. Unfortunately, Matjašič Senior was dead, so he would invite his son, the man who was on top of it all one of Slovenia's wealthiest and most powerful citizens. Personal connections with people like that, figured Ocvirk, are always a plus. The parish priest contacted him personally and Matjašič Junior agreed. Yes, he said, he had an empty slot in his schedule; he had intended to go to a church thing sometime soon anyway, as he and his family were *proud Catholics*.

"Fine, I'll come to this circus of yours," said Matjašič and hung up.

Father Ocvirk swallowed the *circus* part and looked forward to the visit. Unfortunately, only half of what he had planned actually happened. The first part of the parish priest's plan went off without a hitch, he got to meet Mr Matjašič in person and even managed to exchange phone numbers with him. However, he had not done the bishop a big a favour as he first hoped he would. Knez and Matjašič Junior shook hands, exchanged niceties about his father, who the bishop did in fact know and *thought fondly of the old man* and then they lost interest in each other. It might have just been Ocvirk, but the priest got the feeling that the bishop was acting reserved towards Matjašič, and he was equally indifferent to the bishop. To cap it all off, Matjašič disappeared immediately after lunch. He got lost somewhere in the crowd and never returned.

They ate well. The tavern owner's family went all out, even more so than usual. Bread with pumpkin seeds arrived at the table straight from the oven, the soup was hot and delicious, the meat soft, and the fried potatoes with onions was just how the people

around here liked it: fatty and with plenty of onions. Only the atmosphere during lunch was a little too glum. Ocvirk had envisioned relaxed chatter, he had hoped for a joke or two or at least some biblical tales told by the high-ranking guest, but in vain. It wasn't as though something was wrong, only the bishop appeared to be preoccupied.

There was nothing actually wrong with the bishop. To tell jokes or regale the people eagerly awaiting his words even outside of the pulpit with biblical anecdotes was not in his nature. He rather listened or simply enjoyed in the blessing of the food in silence. But this time there was something else. In the crowd, Bishop Knez caught sight of a familiar face. Well, he caught sight of several faces that he had seen before; many people whose faces seemed familiar to him, but he could not place them. Nevertheless, one of them stood out. He thought about going up to them, maybe later ...

The second thing that was preoccupying the bishop's thoughts during lunch was an expression. The word that shot into his brain like an arrow on more than one occasion was *dichotomy*. That very same day he had spoken about it in his sermon, naturally not using the more complex word since his audience was made up of more simple people, instead opting for division, separation into two opposing poles. In the sermon he addressed the contrast between the secular and the sacred, now, his mind went to the homeless man. He motioned to his driver across the table, who then nodded in response.

When they had finished eating, Father Ocvirk's plan was to have them rest a little, let the food settle in their stomachs, but, as soon as he put down his coffee cup, the bishop announced that it was time to socialise. He got up, flung open the swing door and left. The rest hurried after him. As he went through the main room of the tavern, he avoided the large table where two religious families were sitting and eating. The gold crosses the two mothers wore around their necks were testimony to their deep faith. As was the number of children. The first family had three daughters, the second had four girls and one boy. The fathers looked quite similar; they both had moustaches and a somewhat zealous look in their eyes. The children, aged from five to seventeen, were healthy, robust and full of child-like vigour. The parents were justifiably proud of them, although maybe not all of them to the same degree. The eldest girls were obviously bored. When the families saw that the bishop was leaving, they quickly guzzled down what was left on their plates, the fathers downed the remainder of their beers, paid and hastily went after him. They mustn't miss the meeting. They split up in front of the tavern. The parents and the younglings of the family made their way into the throng, while the two teenage girls gave each other a look, stuck out their tongues at each other, took advantage of the crowd and retreated towards the church where there was not a soul to be found. Their red and green coats disappeared behind the church arches, then the girls could finally have some fun of their own. Between the religious enthusiasm with which their parents were following Bishop Knez only a few metres away and what was going on their heads, there was also a dichotomy.

Marko Breznik, a detective from the Violent Crimes and Sexual Assault Unit at the Maribor Police Directorate, stood in the middle of the crowd and watched the people milling about. He could also be considered as part of the dichotomy of today's pilgrimage

if he had at all been aware that beneath the surface a pattern had begun to emerge. The Breznik family was also Catholic, but you couldn't tell from the outside. Anica didn't wear necklaces with gold crosses and, with two children, they fit right in with the average of Slovenian secular families. Nevertheless, Breznik was alone here today. He wasn't particularly pleased about this; the Mass and sermon given by Bishop Knew were first-rate and offered a superb spiritual revelation. His words were truly touching and he therefore regretted Matej and Julija not having heard them. But the children had decided to stay with their mother and their father had, whether he had wanted to or not, let them have their way.

Someone bumped into Breznik from behind. He had just been thinking how his eleven-year-old son would interpret the bishop's analogies, while the people in the crowd were pushing past one another the whole time. The man who had bumped into him was part of a small group of a man and two women. It was interesting that they could also be included in the pattern of dichotomies that was pervading today's gathering in Ptujška Gora. In the hustle and bustle, the threesome and the detective had not noticed each other; if they had, Breznik would have caught something that was insignificant in itself, but it was symptomatic. That's the thing about appearances. People notice them, despite them not having any deeper meaning. The women, both in their late thirties, were interesting. Based on their behaviour, they were obviously friends, both were attractive but at the same time—at least as far as appearances go—at complete opposite ends of the spectrum. One had pitch black hair, the other was light blonde. The first had luscious curls that sprung in all directions; the other had her hair pulled up into a ponytail, and it flowed like a cascade onto her neck. The first had taut Eskimo cheeks, the other had the perfectly chiselled features of a Michelangelo statue. But the division between the threesome appeared elsewhere. What their relationship was and where the man fit into the story, it was impossible to tell; the most likely guess would be that they were acquaintances, neighbours, maybe coworkers. That the man was the partner of one or the other women was less probable. During morning Mass, they stood together at the back of the church, with the black-haired woman standing in the middle. The man listened to the service intently, the women less so. When the bishop left for lunch, they split up. The women wandered off, while the man stood among the people lining up in front of the church, only a few metres from the bishop's incident with the infuriated old man. He hadn't seen what had happened. Later, after lunch, the man could be seen with the black-haired woman by the stands; even later he was chatting with the blonde by the foot of the steps. Over time, the story repeated itself, the man and the black-haired woman were alone again; but a little before four, when the event was drawing to a close, the pieces of their puzzle fell into place. For a while, the two women were together, then the three of them left together and made their way towards the car park. If anyone had been watching them leave, they would have first seen a black mop then a light ponytail bobbing up and down in the crowd. Mop, ponytail. Black, white, black, white. When they passed a particular car, the doors of it opened and from the interior the beginning of the waltz from *Swan Lake* by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky sounded out.

Lost in his own thoughts, Breznik had not registered a lot that had been going on around him (maybe even something more important than the waltz from *Swan Lake*). When the bishop joined the crowd outside after lunch, the throng subsided, dispersed, some leaving, others going to get lunch at the local taverns, while others took advantage of the beautiful day and went off for a short walk, to the cemetery, maybe even further to the edge of the forest. Many went to sit on the benches around the church, eating what they had brought with them, while many others waited for a chance to meet the guest of honour. Bishop Knez went from one person to another, shook hands, exchanged a few words with one, sat and chatted with another. When he sensed that the person wanted it, he would make the sign of the cross. He gently touched their forehead and, using his thumb, first made a downwards motion, then a horizontal line. In doing so, he murmured: “In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

Between Arithmetic and Geometry

Sunday, 9 February, 4:00–4:30 p.m.

Tanja stood and stared ahead. He was lying in front of her. His eyes were closed, muscles relaxed, his cheeks were clean shaven. She noticed the symmetrical shape of his face, his proportionate nose, well-defined cheekbones, the firm line of his mouth. She looked at his exposed neck and shoulders, his smooth brown skin. Then she lifted her gaze, stared out into the distance and began to daydream.

She thought about what she remembered from the day that she saw Miloš for the first time. It was a school day and the students were sitting on the benches in front of the secondary school, among them Tanja and her group of friends. Who exactly was there, she couldn't remember, she was only sure of Andreja. Yes, Andreja was the one who pointed out the tall boy on the other side of the park. Or was she the one who pointed him out to Andreja? Tanja's memory was not clear on this. What had happened exactly? Tanja was straining so hard to see that the sun blinded her. Any moment now it would go down behind the school roof, its last rays were shining onto their bench, squeezing through between Arithmetic and Geometry. Arithmetic and Geometry were two of the statues on the roof of the Maribor First Secondary School. The four standing figures wearing fine draped cloth and standing proudly were arranged along the façade, looking out onto the park and giving the school an air of erudition. If Tanja wanted to see them properly, she had to shade her eyes with her hand. Yes, it was a sunny day and Miloš was standing on the other side of the park.

Tanja's second memory of Miloš was connected to music. The sun went down, instead of him she hears Sting's voice. She sang together with him:

*Every breath you take,
Every move you make,
Every bond you break,
Every step you take,
I'll be watching you.*

Whether they ever listened to this song together or whether it was just the hit of that summer, she didn't know. She smiled when she saw the image of a thirty-year-younger Miloš before her. He had been tall even then, thin as a rake, with black hair and—the reason why she had smiled—already wearing his beloved black leather jacket.

Tanja came back to reality. She dropped her gaze onto the man lying before her. It seemed as though he were sleeping. But he wasn't sleeping, he was dead. She knew that

he was dead. He had to be, otherwise it wouldn't make sense. He was lying on something white. It wasn't a bed sheet, nor was it a shroud. It was a plastic bag. Artificial, shiny, impermeable. Unpleasant to the touch for the living, practical for the dead. The plastic keeps in the juices when they begin to flow from the decomposing body.

Tanja forced the unpleasant image from her head. She threw a pack of Camel cigarettes onto the table. Before doing so, she had taken a cigarette out of the box, lit it up, taken a sip of her coffee and a big drag off the cigarette. Well, shit, she thought. She had always had an affinity for the Camel packaging; the yellow colour of the sand, the brown palm trees and pyramids in the background and the image of the camel. The flavour of the tobacco played a part, but not a significant one. She liked it, just strong enough, without any unpleasant aftertastes. Of course, Tanja didn't smoke because of the nicely drawn camel on the pack, nor because of the attractive design, but this did add to her enjoyment of the ritual. And vice versa. The cautionary images of corpses that now replaced the camel on the boxes of cigarettes, regardless of how lovely and similar in appearance to a young Miloš they were, wouldn't make her stop smoking.

When the telephone rang, she ignored it. If they were going to ruin her enjoyment with pictures of dead people, she wouldn't let any other disturbances get in the way. And it wasn't even her phone that was ringing, but Miloš'. His snoring penetrated from the living room through the half-open sliding doors onto the terrace. It was a Sunday, the time was four thirty in the afternoon, they had eaten at her place, they were both off work and they were enjoying the last moments of a peaceful weekend.

"Yes?" Miloš' voice. Then a few moments of silence.

"I'm on my way."

Steps, the sound of water coming from the bathroom, rustling in the entryway, shoes being put on. Miloš' head popped through the terrace door. He shrugged, Tanja nodded to him, then he disappeared inside. She heard the front door close behind him. Tanja refilled her coffee mug, reached for the box of Camels on the table, avoided looking at the lovely corpse and lit another cigarette.

Miloš had not told Tanja who had called and where he was off to; he was not in the habit of doing so. They had been together for two years now, but they kept their lives separate. They each had their own flat and did not interfere in each other's lives. Miloš' flat had retained the feel of a bachelor pad, insensitive to so-called *aesthetic living*, Tanja's mark of a mature, elegant woman. When she was at Miloš' place, she wasn't disturbed by his messy bedroom, wasn't taken aback by the disarray in the bathroom nor by the contents of the laundry basket. The fact that discarded socks weren't lying about the flat was something that Miloš himself took care of—at least when he knew visitors were coming. Since they sometimes cooked at his place, Tanja, in a discreet way—in the form of New Year's and birthday presents—made sure that his kitchen was equipped with the necessary pans, dishes and appliances. She got carried away a bit only once, when she tried to extend her influence to accessories that *beautified* the flat. She gifted Miloš a modernist standing lamp, a framed poster for the opera *Madame Butterfly* as was performed in the opera house she worked at and a series of pretty glass-covered

photographs by Inge Morath. She could immediately tell that he did not like this. She elegantly resolved this awkwardness and within a month all three items were relocated to her place.

They also spent time together when it suited both of them. Sometimes they spent days on end together, then they would take a few days off to be apart. If the detectives were working on a complex case, they saw even less of each other. When Tanja was on tour, she wasn't in Slovenia for three to four weeks. It was then that Miloš was forced to admit: towards the end, he really did miss her. The arrangement where they were not required to explain themselves to each other suited them both. Who they were talking to and what they were talking about using their mobile phones fell into this category.

But Tanja knew that if a call on Sunday afternoon meant anything else apart from work, Miloš would tell her. And, after all, she would glean more from his facial expression than from his words. She knew that he was leaving to go to a crime scene and that it was serious. After the call he was wide awake and keyed up, despite usually needing quite some time to perk up. She knew in the way he stormed off that he wouldn't be back tonight. If they finished at a normal time, he would call her, otherwise she would hear from him in the morning or later on, depending on the severity of the case.

Fine, thought Tanja. She enjoyed being with Miloš, she had always had a thing for him, since that sunny day in front of their secondary school in fact. Alas their lives drifted apart after secondary school, although she never completely erased him from her memory. When they ran into each other after almost thirty years, and she saw in his eyes how happy he was to see her, she knew—even before they had finished drinking their coffee—that she would get involved with him. After two years, Tanja's feelings were just as strong as they had been the first day. What is more, over time she had gotten to see his hidden side. She was slowly unveiling the layers of Miloš' personality.

Tanja had always been attracted to opposites; she like hot and cold, sweet and sour, apricot dumplings and lettuce, chocolate with chillies, laughter and tears. In Miloš, too. She would give in to the embrace of his strong arms, enjoy the weight of his body when he lay on her and entered her. She would close her eyes and think of the sensitive soul she was slowly revealing somewhere deep inside him. And her pleasure only grew.

Nevertheless, Tanja was looking forward to have the rest of Sunday to herself. She would take pleasure in treating herself to another cigarette (and deducting it from the next day's allowance), finish drinking her coffee and take in the view of the last rays of sun shining on the foothills of the Pohorje mountains.

The caped Lady of Graces

Sunday, 9 February, 4:30–11:00 p.m.

Miloš stepped out into the car park, looked towards the Pohorje Mountains and made his way to the car. He got in, put his foot on the brake, shifted into neutral, was about to reach for the key before remembering that he didn't need one, pressed the start button, started the engine and waited for the display on the dashboard to light up. He then attempted to enter the name of the location into the navigation system. Damn it, what was it again? It wasn't that it was hard, but every sat nav had its own logic that you have to get used to. It took him a while to get the hang of it, he had had the car for less than a week. During this time, he hadn't had the chance to go for a long drive yet, it was only on this Friday and Saturday that he and Tanja had christened it with a trip to Verona. While they were there, they had used the navigation, and it had worked flawlessly, but it was true that only Tanja had used it.

First, he had to change the country. That he succeeded in doing. Then he keyed in the town and pressed *Go*. The system was not happy with that; it wanted him to enter the street and house number. He was sure that must be a better way of doing this, but he didn't have time for that now. He phoned the dispatcher to get the exact address.

"What?" said Miloš. "What caped Lady of Graces? I can't enter that into the sat nav."

"Well, drive to Kidričevo and then on to Majšperk and you'll get there. You can't miss it."

"Fine," said Miloš, put his seatbelt on and drove off.

The journey to the crime scene, which was going to be, as Miloš had learned from Breznik whom he had spoken to on the phone, *one big fucking mess*, took him half an hour from the car park in front of Tanja's flat. Still not quite used to the car, he decided to use the motorway; it seemed like a better idea than driving along the tortuous local roads.

Miloš exited the motorway at Kidričevo. He went around the exit ramp loop and turned onto a regional road at the junction. After a kilometre of straight road cutting through a forest, he reached Kidričevo. A few houses lining the road, some junctions, shops, a petrol station to the left, low flats to the right and then the Talum industrial complex.

After he drove through a railway underpass a few metres from one of the entrances to the Talum factory, he swore. The new car started making strange noises, as though a cover had come loose and the sound of the engine was penetrating into the cockpit. He took his foot off the throttle and the sound changed. He accelerated and the sound grew louder. An unpleasant, ugly sound. He took his foot of the accelerator again and listened. Then he figured out what was happening, breathed a sigh of relief and continued on his way.

After leaving Kidričevo, he went in the direction of Majšperk. There were even fewer cars on the road here, only a car here and there coming the other way, which was nothing

out of the ordinary, it was a sleepy Sunday afternoon in the beginning of February. Then Miloš began to notice more and more cars. They were standing still, not moving. They were parked alongside the road, at an angle in ditches or in fields. When he reached the next junction, he took the road towards Ptujška Gora. For a while, he drove up a road that climbed up past the village houses and led to a roundabout. In the centre stood a sculpture. A rectangular marble base with a bronze statue of a girl gazing towards the church. Before he exited the roundabout, Miloš managed to read the inscription on the base out of the corner of his eye. Hmm, he thought, probably symbolic of something.

Immediately after the roundabout, he saw that there was police tape blocking the road. Miloš stopped. An unknown police officer walked over to Miloš, checked his ID, lifted the tape and showed him where to go. Miloš drove up to the cluster of houses. Now there were countless cars to be seen, there was barely anywhere left to park. And there were more and more people. They stood in small and large groups, talking amongst themselves and glancing around. He drove on. At the top of the hill, he caught sight of a police officer waving to him. He drove towards him and parked by a wall. Then he made his way on foot to the courtyard outside the church. Before the steps that led up to the church stood seven police vehicles, four vans, one four-by-four and two cars. All the police vehicles had their signal lights on (for no apparent reason). Their frenetic flashing gave the scene a menacing air. The white Renault van belonged to forensics, and a Volkswagen bearing the court's logo stood right by the steps. In view of the general state of the car, thought Miloš to himself, for example the recurring rust along the edge of the fender (since having a new car, Miloš noticed these things all the more), it would probably be a good idea to take the ministry's sticker off the doors. Rust doesn't really inspire a sense of confidence in the justice system. Right at the end was parked a luxury, shiny grey and wickedly low Audi coupé. When Miloš saw it, he wrinkled his brow.

The Basilica of our caped Lady of Graces stood in the centre of Ptujška Gora, a clustered village in the Majšperk municipality of the Drava Plain. It was thirty-five kilometres from Maribor, twenty from Ptuj. The church in Ptujška Gora was considered one of the most beautiful Gothic cultural monuments in Slovenia. It was especially famed for its main altar, after which it was also named. The deep relief of our caped Lady of Graces depicts a standing Mary clutching the Baby Jesus with her left hand and gazing into the distance. Her wide cape was spread out, held by angels. Above Mary's head, two angels carried her crown. Under her outspread cape were huddled a mass of people. Depicted were more than seventy human figures. All had their hands joined in prayer, all were looking at the Mother of Jesus. Looks held a symbolic meaning in ecclesiastical iconography. Here, too. The people were looking at Mary, and she was staring out into the distance, which symbolised the divine. Mary was thus a kind of intermediary between the secular and the sacred. And so on.

The other thing the church in Ptujška Gora was known for were the steps at the bottom of which Miloš was standing.

"What's going on?" he asked one of the police officers.

"No clue, nobody is saying anything," said the police officer. "See for yourself."

Miloš went up the steps. His colleague, Detective Chief Inspector Marko Breznik was standing in the carport. He was white as a sheet. He was wearing his blue Sunday suit, trousers, jacket and waistcoat, a white shirt and a tie.

“Hi, Marko,” said Miloš, nodding approvingly at his attire.

Breznik nodded his head in response. He ignored the compliment about his clothes.

“Aren’t we a bit far away?” asked Miloš. “Don’t they have their own police stations here? Kidričevo? Majšperk?”

“Just police offices. With official hours on Monday from nine to twelve and on Friday from eight to nine.”

“What about Ptuj?”

Breznik shook his head. No way. Too important.

“Well, let’s have a look then,” said Miloš.

Breznik turned around and went into the church. Miloš followed him. The interior was spacious, with high Gothic ceilings, and which filled one with awe. The nave was sectioned off with narrow columns to the sides that only intensified the height. It was dark in the church and a touch warmer than outside. It smelled of incense, damp and rotten wood. And there was something else as well. Miloš didn’t know what to expect, but certainly not this. There wasn’t a living soul in the church. The emptiness was even more obvious in contrast with the crowd outside.

The only living thing was a police officer standing by the wall to the left. He was standing by a stone portal that framed a simple metal door. Miloš looked at Breznik, who nodded and motioned towards the door. The entrance to the vestry. When they came closer, the doors opened and through them came two men from forensics in white overalls and carrying kit cases. They were speaking to each other in hushed tones and shaking their heads. Miloš looked after them. Was he imagining things or did they look unusually pale? He walked up to the door and was going to enter, but something stopped him. Miloš looked down, stared at the hand that was on his chest and then looked to see to whom it belonged. The police officer guarding the door, who was almost as tall as Miloš, had now removed his hand, but had taken a step towards the middle of the door, blocking his way.

“What’s all this then?” asked Miloš.

“Orders from higher up,” said the police officer.

“Saying—what?”

“Strictly authorised people only.”

Miloš looked at Breznik. He nodded and the police officer stepped aside and freed up the doorway. But when Miloš wanted to go past him, he stopped him once again, but this time he put his hand out, palm up (being careful not to touch him).

“Phone,” he said.

“What?”

“Hand over your mobile phone, you’ll get it back when you come back out.”

Miloš hadn’t a clue what was going on.

“What the hell?”

“Sorry, orders.”

“Oh, yes? You want my gun, too? Listen here, if I take a picture inside, it’s my business, alright? Now, push off.”

The police officer hesitated for a second, then he withdrew.

“What was all that about?” asked Miloš.

“Bah, Kralj. His orders. Over the top. Although, probably justified this time. Levstek made him do it, and the investigating judge, who is also here, agreed. Total lockdown. They are terrified of anything from behind this door being leaked to the public. The police officer happens to be from Ptuj, you see.”

The vestry of the Basilica of our Lady of Graces, as an extension of the church, was clearly visible from outside. It was located to the left, right before the church transitioned to the altar area. With one wall it was annexed to the church; three walls were external. On one of them was a (non-functioning) door, on the other two were high semi-circular built-in windows. It was only possible to enter the vestry through the door in the church’s interior. Architecturally speaking, the annex blended in with the church seamlessly.

Inside, the vestry was a rather small space with a solid wood table in the centre. Behind it stood a wooden chair with a high back that was reminiscent of a throne. In front of the table were two narrow armchairs. A cupboard stood by the wall to the left and next to it were shelves which housed the church’s miscellaneous odds and ends. Two paintings hung on the wall to the right. The back wall was empty, except for a window and a large, almost two-metre-high crucifix, that rose above the table and throne. There were four people in the room when Miloš and Breznik entered. In the corner the investigating judge was nervously talking with the prosecutor, Levstek. Behind the table, crouched over looking at something on the floor were Tone Lesjak, head of the Maribor forensic department, and one of his assistants, who was documenting what her boss was doing with a camera.

As soon as he entered the room, Miloš noticed the blood. Masses of blood. Blood was splattered on the table, the back rest and seat of the throne were soaked in it, a large part of the back wall was covered in blood splatter, blood was dripping from the Jesus nailed to the cross. Blood was running down the doors of the cupboard, off the shelves. It was as though someone had used a hose to spray blood all over the room. Molecules of blood were even floating in the air.

“If slaughterhouses had glass walls, we would all be vegetarians,” said Miloš and stepped around the table to see what was lying on the floor.

Lesjak looked up: “Paul McCartney. And what does that have anything to do with this?”

“A slaughterhouse,” said Miloš.

“Right.”

On the blood-soaked rug lay a man’s dead body wearing a vestment. Miloš was not familiar with Catholic rituals, but he assumed that it was formal liturgical clothing. For all other topics, he was an expert. The man’s neck was slashed. The cut was long, smooth, running from one end, where it began under his ear, across the middle, slicing through his Adam’s apple and ending on the other side, a few centimetres behind his ear. The cut was made horizontally, as though using a ruler. The gash was wide open. Looking at the slimy

and bloody mass was unpleasant even for the detectives. The knife—or whatever it had been—sliced through the veins on both sides of his neck, hence all the blood. While the blood was spurting from his wounds, the man had been stumbling around. The murderer, thought Miloš, must be covered in blood, too. The murder weapon was not next to the body.

The deceased was about sixty years old, of medium height and build. His head was lying at a strange angle, as though it had been half torn off his body. The cut was deep, it had sliced into his muscles. His eyes were wide open and were staring straight at Miloš. The dead man's expression was a mixture of horror and astonishment. And there was something else. Something left unspoken? Miloš looked into the corpse's face as though he wanted to memorise the look he was giving. Then he backed off a few centimetres and turned his head one hundred and eighty degrees. On the wall behind him hung two paintings, reproductions with religious motifs. He wasn't familiar with the left one, but the one on the right was a pretty famous picture—if he wasn't mistaken—by Leonardo da Vinci. Miloš looked at the body on the floor again and tried to follow its gaze carefully.

“What are you doing?” asked Breznik.

“I want to see what he's looking at. See for yourself.”

Breznik reluctantly looked into the dead man's eyes and tried to determine the direction of his gaze.

“I think it's the painting.”

“True enough,” said Miloš, “but which one?”

“The one on the right,” said Breznik and pointing at the painting.

Miloš nodded. He beckoned to Lesjak's assistant to photograph the wall and both paintings.

“You think it's important?” asked Breznik disbelievingly.

“I doubt it,” replied Miloš. “But just so you know if Martin asks.”

A purple vestment with gold trim was lying on the floor by the body. The white shirt he wore under it was drenched in blood. The shirt reminded Miloš of his youth. That was how the old hippies used to dye their T-shirts. Two-toned. The top half in one colour, the bottom in another.

“That ...robe,” said Miloš.

“Vestment,” said Breznik. “What about it?”

“There isn't any blood on it. Why?”

“Because he wasn't wearing it when it happened?”

Miloš nodded.

“But where could it have been that it stayed clean?”

Breznik looked around. “Laid on one of the armchairs? Those two are the only ones that aren't bloodied.”

Miloš nodded again.

“Who is it, do we know?” asked Miloš.

“Of course.” Breznik sounded insulted. His voice shook. “This is Monsignor Bishop Ignac Knez. He offered Holy Mass here today, which was one of the biggest church events this year. This is an unfathomable tragedy. This is ... a complete disaster.”

Miloš whistled silently. Of course, he knew who Bishop Ignac Knez was. Yes, Marko was right, it was *a big fucking mess*.

The head of the police officer who had demanded that Miloš hand over his phone popped round the door.

“Scuse me, but what should I do with the people? They want to go home. It’s already dark outside.”

The investigating judge and the prosecutor Luka Levstek stopped talking and looked at each other.

“Which one of you will be leading this investigation?” asked Levstek.

“For now, Detective Inspector Miloš,” said Breznik.

“So?”

Miloš turned to the police officer. “How many are there?”

“I guess there are about five, six hundred left.”

“And you are keeping them all together?”

“Yes, more or less. Of course, we couldn’t fence in the whole village. Some of them went across the fields. But we aren’t letting any cars out.”

“Well, I guess you can let them go.”

“Hold on, inspector,” said Levstek. “Wouldn’t it be a good idea to book these people? We have at least fifteen police officers here, get them to quickly photograph their ID cards, and that’s that.”

“We could,” said Miloš, unconvinced.

“But you’re not keen on it, or what?”

“A waste of time,” said Miloš. And went quiet. Miloš was known for not saying much. What was left unspoken had to be anticipated, imagined or deduced from what had already been uttered or the situation itself.

“This,” said Breznik instead of Miloš and pointed to the body, “is not something you can take lightly. There are things going on in the background that we will surely uncover in the investigation. Forensics will come up with evidence of the perpetrator’s presence at the scene of the crime. The fact that someone was at Mass proves nothing. Secondly, the person who did this is not waiting outside for us to decide to we book him or not, but has fled ages ago. And the remaining people will be glad to help us later on if we need them.”

Miloš nodded and said, “Let them go home.”

After the police officer had left, the investigating judge and Levstek joined the detectives. The judge stayed in the background, her subservience towards the prosecutor was obvious.

“And now the most important thing,” said Levstek. “Your man Kralj agreed to and approved our suggestion.” Although he spoke on behalf of them both, he didn’t think it worthwhile to look at the investigating judge who he was referring to. “None of what we see here in this room can get out to the public. Under any condition. No pictures taken with mobile phones, no selfies with the body or other nonsense. The details about what

we are witness to here are known by nine people. The judge and I, you two, four forensics and the police officer guarding the door. Only photographs and video recordings that are crucial to the investigation are allowed. You are all personally responsible for any misuse of the forensic recordings.”

Lesjak nodded.

“Our official statement is death under suspicious circumstances. The most we can afford to say at this point in time is that the involvement of a third party in the bishop’s death is not ruled out. And that’s all. No particulars, no juicy details, no mention of sliced necks, nothing about the blood, no jokes about slaughterhouses. Got it?”

Nobody thought it necessary to answer.

“In any case, not a word about this.”

Luka Levstek bent over the dead man who was staring at a painting on the wall, as though searching for redemption within it, and pointed to the bishop’s forehead. There, in thick black letters, was written: *FUCK YOU!*

Monsignor Ignac Knez

Monday, 10 February, 3:00–6:00 p.m.

Monsignor Ignac Knez was a titular bishop of the Catholic Church in Slovenia, a missionary, a humanitarian, the Pope's confidant and—as even those outside religious circles would agree—a great man. In the world of Roman Catholicism, he was an undisputed moral authority. A man of genuine and deep piety, he was a doctor of theology, an author of widely-read papers on relationships and the role of God in the modern world, but, at the same time, never an ardent advocate of faith as such. Rather than threatening with sword and fire, he preferred to be openly self-critical. He was aware of his smallness and humility, and actually lived it.

He spent many years in African missions. He never discussed daily politics (even if people tried to draw him in), looking upon religious dogma with a healthy dose of reason. He was a big believer in being open about the exposed church pedophilia scandals, questioned the purpose of celibacy and had a zero-tolerance policy for the Church's financial machinations. He defended his convictions with such a luminous aura of religious enthusiasm that even the Catholic elites looked favourably upon him. Not only that, there was talk of the Pope raising him to the rank of cardinal before long.

“So how did he, a virtual saint, find himself in the middle of that dirty finance business going on in the Maribor Archdiocese?” asked Drago.

It was 3 p.m. Only a minute earlier, Kralj had walked into the office, marking the beginning of the first official meeting of the Knez case. Considering who the murder victim was and particularly the way that he had died, everyone was expected to attend. The meeting was held at the office of detectives of the Violent Crimes and Sexual Assault Unit on the second floor of the police station by the park on the street of Maistrova ulica in Maribor. The office was large, the largest on the floor. It was actually made up of two conjoined spaces connected by a permanently open double door. Even though the area in between was narrower than the two offices, it was here that the detectives liked to congregate. First off, they felt as though they could be in both places at the same time, and second, the area was furnished with a comfortable sofa and a two-seater, a coffee table with newspapers, a cabinet with a coffee machine in the corner and, to give the place a homely feel, a tall, healthy ficus and a lush, leafy monstera.

In the office were Matjaž Kralj, head of the General Crimes Division at the Maribor Police Directorate, Detective Chief Inspector Martin Vrenko, head of the task force, and his five detectives.

“Have some respect,” said Breznik, throwing Drago an angry look. The day after the discovery of the body he seemed more peaceful and the pallor in his cheeks had vanished.

He had changed his suit, white shirt and tie for a pair of jeans and a plaid shirt. But the shock in his voice was still there.

“And you don’t even know that,” he went on. “The fact that Knez was at the Maribor Archdiocese between 2008 and 2011 doesn’t mean a thing. I bet he had no clue about the financial irregularities.”

“Drago didn’t mean anything bad, Marko,” said Ivana. “But all we are privy to is the bishop’s public image. The Church—which you know better than any of us—has excellent P.R. God knows what is hiding behind the image they created for him.”

“And what God doesn’t know will be uncovered by our investigation,” said Nika.

“You can hope,” said Drago.

“If it uncovers anything,” said Miloš.

“That’s enough now,” said Kralj, raising his voice. He waited for a bit for Vrenko to calm his people down, but Vrenko said nothing, so he had to speak up. He was tense and did not try to hide it: “No *if*, no *you can hope*. What happened yesterday in Ptujška Gora is now one of the biggest fucking messes we’ve ever had to deal with. Heads will roll on this one. It was essential that I immediately stop information from leaking. This is still the case, for everyone here. Nothing leaves this room if it hasn’t been cleared by Levstek and I. This time, the prosecutor’s office is not giving us free reign but wants to be kept up to date at all times. Martin agrees. The whole group is working the case. I won’t allow for any speculation or people going rogue. This is not playing with local politics like in the Skaza case, it’s not organised crime, it’s not even the mafia. This here is serious. This is the Church.”

Vrenko looked at him. Kralj said that?

“And what is it that you agree with, Martin?” asked Miloš.

“That we control the flow of information to the public, which is what I always think is best. I agree that the prosecutor’s office should be involved, it’s their job, after all. As long as they don’t try to tell us how to do our jobs. Seeing as Levstek is the prosecutor, we can expect that from him, but he is my problem. I agree with Matjaž; the Church’s involvement requires us to be extra cautious. And I agree with Ivana that we have a victim like any other, VIP or no. We have his public image, which can be accurate or not. That shouldn’t interfere, get in the way with or even steer our investigation. Which is why we are going to set Knez’s public image aside and build our case on just the pure facts.”

It was a pure fact that, at the moment of his death, Ignac Knez was sixty-two years and five months old. He was born on 5 September 1957 in Moškanjci, a village less than ten kilometres east of Ptuj. In 1981, he was ordained a priest and, over the next few years, served in various parishes in the Štajerska and Koroška regions. In 1986, he got his PhD from the Faculty of Theology in Ljubljana and started publishing religious papers that soon caught the attention of the Catholic community. In addition to his church duties, he always dedicated some of his time to charity, until 1998 when he devoted himself completely to his missionary work. He left Slovenia and, for well over a decade, lived in central and south Africa and later in Madagascar where he met Pedro Opeka, a missionary of Slovenian and Argentinian descent, with whom he worked for a while. That was also

the time when the media started writing about him and his work. In the spring of 2003, his missionary work, specifically the building of a school in Kayumba, a town approximately thirty kilometres south of the Rwandan capital Kigali, was the subject of a major photo reportage in National Geographic. The photographs taken by renowned Slovenian photographer Arne Hodalič of then forty-five-year-old Ignac show the latter fiercely wielding a pickaxe above the dry Rwandan soil, feeding the chickens in an improvised enclosure and teaching a group of children with skin as dark as charcoal sitting under the thick canopy of a breadfruit tree, along with what perhaps is a little too idyllic a portrait of the man. The photographer had him sit in a rocking chair with a glass of water in his hand, staring out over a red sunset.

In 2008, Ignac Knez returned to Slovenia. Until 2011, he served at the Maribor Archdiocese, holding no visible offices. During this time, he published a few polemical papers on the role of morality and the stance of a Catholic priest, based on which he was invited to come to the Vatican in November 2011 by the then Pope Benedict XVI. In March 2014, the following pope, Pope Francis, issued a papal bull appointing him as a titular bishop. A year later, that same pope awarded him the honorary title of Monsignor. One year ago, already as a titular bishop and Monsignor, Ignac Knez returned to Slovenia and performed nuncial duties and offered a few notable Masses, most recently on Sunday, 9 February this year, at the Basilica of our Lady of Graces in Ptujška Gora.

As there were fewer of these Masses than the parishioners would have liked given the Monsignor's popularity, this Sunday was going to be a first-class event. On Friday night, national TV weatherman Andrej Velkavrh predicted rain for the entire weekend, cracking one of his jokes at the end, this time something about the English and their umbrellas. Luckily, he was mistaken on this occasion. On Sunday morning, after a few drops of rain that fell until about nine, nine thirty in the morning, the sky cleared up and the rest of the day was bright. People left their umbrellas in their cars and basked in the winter sun. In front of a packed church, Bishop Knez concluded his Mass and sermon entitled *Let Us Look Inside Us through God* at 12:30, then had lunch, after which he spent some time with the congregation. Around 3 p.m., he retreated to the vestry of the basilica to get some rest where, between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m., he was brutally murdered by a yet unknown perpetrator. According to the rumours, which the Holy See, though being aware of them, did not deny, Monsignor Ignac Knez would have been named Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church in the following two years. And looking further into the future, it would not be completely off the table for Slovenia to get its first pope with Ignac Knez.

The forensic report

Monday, 10 February, 6:00–9:00 p.m.

“Who wrote this rubbish about a Slovenian pope?” asked Tone Lesjak.

“No one,” replied Breznik in a hurt tone.

“Don’t be offended so easily, Marko. The rest is great, including the part about the cardinal appointment, there is concrete proof of that, hints in articles published in *l’Osservatore Romane*, for example. These are facts, we can use them.”

It was still Monday, the first day after the murder, the time was nearly 7 p.m. Everyone was still in the office. They had just heard a report on the first investigation results from the head of Maribor forensics. It was all very hush-hush, almost ridiculously conspiratorial. Right after the first part of the meeting with the detectives was over, around 4 p.m., Kralj—without telling Vrenko or anyone else about it—called Lesjak, forbidding him to send out the report in digital form; he also would not let it be uploaded to the police intranet which had strong firewall protection against external threats but instead told Lesjak to print it out, make copies and deliver it to the detectives in person in a special folder. When Drago found out about it, he asked if they would have to eat the report when they were finished or if they could burn it. Leaping to Kralj’s defence, Ivana said she doubted that Kralj would come up with something so stupid and that Levstek must be behind it, or someone even more paranoid at the prosecutor’s office or higher up still.

There were now eight people in the office. Detectives Ivana Premk, Nika Lavrič and Marko Breznik were sitting behind their desks, while Miloš, Martin Vrenko and Drago Jazbec were slumped on the sofa. Kralj was pacing up and down. Tone Lesjak was standing between them. He was holding a hefty file in his hands.

“Listen, Matjaž,” said Lesjak, “there is no point in printing out and copying the material and then lugging it around on paper if it was typed up on a computer. When something has been written in Word and imprinted in digital memory, when a photo has been used in a programme, which is necessary for us to process it and even look at it, it’s too late to be thinking about printing and locking stuff up in drawers. The protection of our private network is good enough. When there is a leak, it can’t be blamed on a sophisticated breach of our system but on human error.”

“Don’t go telling me that...” said Kralj. “Anyway, the situation is clear. The prosecutor’s office insists that the details cannot become public and they don’t care how we do it.”

Vrenko again looked at Kralj, just like he had done in the afternoon in the middle of the first meeting. Something was off. This wasn’t the real Kralj.

“I trust my men and women a hundred per cent,” said Lesjak. “The pictures are heavily protected. I agree that these in particular should not become public. Not now, not later. Not because of the Church or anything, but this kind of stuff should *never* become public.”

“So?” asked Vrenko impatiently.

Lesjak walked up to the sofa, pulled up a chair, took a seat, picked up the coffee mugs off the table, handed them to Vrenko, Miloš and Drago, placed the folder on the empty table and opened it. The others gathered around him. The folder contained the photographs of the victim and the crime scene. He started laying them out on the table.

“So. The cause of death is severe blood loss due to a rupture of the carotid arteries. Death occurred within twenty to thirty seconds after the neck was cut. The victim spun and collapsed in agony. Based on the blood spatter on the walls and objects, its amount, direction and intensity, we can assume that the bishop was first facing the back wall, then started turning to the left. He made a two-hundred-and-seventy-degree turn, then lay still. The cut was made with a single slash from left to right. It is twenty-three centimetres long. Such a smooth, single-slash cut could have only been made from behind, meaning that the perpetrator is right-handed.”

“Strength?” asked Vrenko.

“Based on the severed tendons and muscles and the depth of the cut, we first assumed it took enormous strength, but it wasn’t necessary. The depth of the cut is the result of an extremely sharp blade.”

“Such as?” asked Ivana. “A scalpel?”

“I wouldn’t think so. Surgical scalpels have short blades that make superficial cuts. The deepest part of the cut on the victim’s neck is three and a half centimetres. It’s most likely an upholstery knife with a rather open blade. Not a cheap one, though, those are made from fragile plastics, they wouldn’t sustain such pressure. A steel upholstery knife, if I had to guess.”

“You didn’t find one?”

“No. We were in the field the whole night and the team is still there. The village is still sealed shut. Only the locals can get in or out. We didn’t find a single clue, not even the smallest trace. The knife, if indeed it was a knife, left the crime scene together with the perpetrator.

“You say that your teams are reliable?” asked Kralj.

“Even if they weren’t, none of them knows any details.”

“Who found the body anyway?” asked Ivana. “If you’re worried someone will spill the beans, Matjaž, it’s more likely to be an outsider.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” said Breznik, “The body was found at 4.15 p.m. by one of the parishioners who takes care of the flower arrangements and church decorations for special occasions. She walked into the vestry because the bishop’s driver had asked her to. She was supposed to check if the bishop would be resting much longer. The driver was worried they were going to be late as the bishop had another appointment that evening. Based on her statement, she saw the blood as soon as she entered the room and that was more than enough for her. She ran out screaming bloody murder. I spoke to her myself, I doubt that she remembers anything more that the media could get out of her.”

“According to the forensic evidence,” said Lesjak, “her statement is true. There is nothing suggesting that she walked about the room. If she had wanted to see the body that was lying behind the table, she would have had to step in the blood.”

“Did you find anything useful?”

“Not much. No fingerprints of unknown origin, the others were connected to persons who had reason to use the room. There is only a handful of them; a vestry is not a train station, after all. No footprints, no useful genetic material. Only this, perhaps. We found micro traces of mushrooms in the wound.”

“What kind of mushrooms?” asked Drago. He and his son had recently got into mushroom picking.

“Mushrooms. You don’t know what mushroom are?”

“Not in February.”

“I didn’t say fresh traces. I am leaving that to you, but I don’t see any other explanation for how fragments of dry spores of charbonnier and yellow chanterelles would find themselves in the wound of the murder victim other than with a poorly cleaned murder weapon.”

“The vestment?” asked Miloš.

“Yes. The faint traces of blood that were found on the vestment and the nature of the stains suggest that the robe was somewhere where the spurts of blood couldn’t reach it while the murder was taking place, and it was later thrown over the dying bishop.”

“Not dead?” asked Vrenko.

“No, a few stains suggest that he was still moving about under the robe.”

“And where was the robe before that?”

“It could have been anywhere. The corresponding fibre particles were found on both armchairs by the desk that were not bloody, and some under the blood on the chair and the outside of the wardrobe door. But we can’t prove how they got there. They could have been there for months.”

“He had his own vestments. They brought them that morning,” said Breznik.

“Which means that, at the time he was attacked, his vestment was thrown over one of the armchairs,” said Vrenko.

“That’s right,” said Lesjak.

“Anything on the perpetrator?”

“Nothing so far. No footprints. It can’t be forensically established whether there was one or several assailants. We also can’t determine whether the perpetrator was in the room before the bishop or whether they came in after him. Something else may come up, as we are still digging, but I doubt it.”

“Let’s get on with this,” said Kralj impatiently, picking up the photograph of the dead man’s face off the table. He looked at it and grimaced. He didn’t do this because of the red mass of the slit throat or the strikingly goggle-eyed gaze or the distasteful *FUCK YOU!* on his forehead but because he imagined what it would mean for him if this appeared on the front page of the *Slovenske novice* tabloid.

“Are you thinking of his forehead?” asked Ivana.

“No,” said Kralj, “his beautiful little eyes. Of course, I’m thinking about his forehead! Or are we used to murderers doodling obscenities on their victims? Especially when the dead man is the Pope’s personal friend.”

The photograph was passed around. The picture showed the upper half of the bishop’s face, half his nose, his cheeks, eyes, eyebrows, forehead and scalp. To the left and right, the carpet pattern tried to soften the horrific image, but the carpet itself was heavily stained with blood. The writing on his forehead was in black capital letters, roughly five centimetres high and half a centimetre thick. Below, the letters reached his eyebrows, and above, they ended unevenly on the line between the forehead and the vertex. The letters were uniform, reminiscent of block lettering. They did not seem to be written in a rush. The exclamation mark at the end was straight, the dot slightly enlarged, like a small coloured-in circle. The bishop’s dead eyes and the bloody drops made the image look even more bizarre.

“Thank god for that,” said Vrenko.

Kralj looked at him. “Is the chief taking the piss?”

Ivana and Nika looked at each other. Recently, Kralj’s response to stressful situations was a mix of sarcasm and a peculiar brand of humour. Honestly, this third-person address was not bad at times.

“No, I’m not joking,” said Vrenko. “It’s a good lead.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to give this to the graphologists?”

“Not a bad idea. I was thinking more of the content, but we’ll give that a go, too. Although, with so few letters, we shouldn’t expect anything useful.”

“What about the content?” asked Kralj. “The content is clear. There is nothing uncertain about it. I think that the formulation of the message to the dead man is clear enough.”

Nika suppressed a laugh.

“Detective Lavrič finds this funny?”

“I think Martin is referring to something else,” said Nika, having been called out. “The writing tells us a lot about the perpetrator. Why would the killer risk desecrating the body even further if they were in a hurry to flee the crime scene? What was the purpose of the desecration? Is it a message for us, the investigators? Did they want to divert attention away from themselves? Point to another suspect? And if so, *which other suspect*? Or is it a message for the ecclesiastical circles? Perhaps the general public? Or is it a message to themselves?”

“Nika is right,” said Vrenko. “The writing, however sickening, is our best lead. If the killer had written it to set someone up, it would have been different. We can’t do shit with an ordinary *fuck you*. If the writing on his forehead said something like Mt 19:18, we would know that it is a reference to Chapter 19, verse 18 of the Gospel according to Matthew that talks about God’s commandments, killing, adultery, stealing and bearing false witness. That would ...”

“Don’t tell me you know the Bible by heart?” interrupted Kralj.

“No,” said Miloš, “that would be too much, even for our Breznik. We’ve been through this.”

“And what was your conclusion?”

“A quote from the Bible,” continued Vrenko, “would tell us two things. That it was a classic case of misdirection and the direction in which the perpetrator was trying to guide us. We would also know that the perpetrator was intelligent and had excellent knowledge of Catholicism ...”

“Like you?”

“No, we had time to Google it, which the perp didn’t when they were in the vestry. So, either the killer knew the quote by heart or had armed themselves with it beforehand. One or the other would be an important piece of information.”

“But his forehead doesn’t say Mt eighteen or whatever.”

“No, so we can rule that out. Everything that I’ve described is what our perp is *not*. So we know something. Another thing that Nika mentioned is the message. No matter what it says—it *is* a message. But for whom and why? If we assume that it is addressed to ecclesiastical circles, the killer has some kind of a relationship with the Church. That is one line of investigation. Substantial enough, we are already working on it. The second possibility is that they wanted to drop a bomb in public. Killing a high clerical dignitary with an obscenity on his forehead is an atomic bomb. Which would, as befits an atomic bomb, attract international attention. But this is not an option, unless we’re dealing with an extremely unintelligent person. So unintelligent that they would leave behind much more than the scant evidence we recovered. So, we can rule that out as well.”

“I don’t understand,” said Kralj.

“Anyone with a normal perception of reality would anticipate your reaction,” said Vrenko.

“My reaction? Why mine?” asked Kralj.

“Not just yours, they would anticipate any normal reaction to such vulgar writing on the forehead of a dead clerical dignitary. They would know that their message doesn’t stand a chance of getting into the media. That the police would never reveal it to the public.”

“They couldn’t know that for sure.”

“True, and they could be even less sure that their blasphemy would be *guaranteed* to get out. So: if they wanted to go public, they would undoubtedly do something else after the first step.”

“Which is?”

“Take a photograph of their work and see that it got published. Five minutes after taking the pictures of their dirty work, the photographs could have been posted online, circling the globe in half an hour. But they didn’t do that.”

“So why did they write it?”

“The only logical explanation is: *because they had to*. Because of the hate, indignation or whatever was inside them.” They only did it for themselves.”

Kralj pondered for a moment. “Or they wanted us to think that.”

“Yes, of course, that’s possible.”

“So, we’re back to square one.”

“No,” said Vrenko, “we know plenty. Even if we consider both possibilities, we’re looking for the following: either a total nut job or someone who is devilishly clever.”

“And everyone we come across will be judged based on the two,” said Ivana. “Clever people are not a problem. Luckily, most of them are also very cocky, which can be exploited. We are pretty good at getting them to brag about their cleverness.”

“And nut jobs,” said Nika, “no matter how big of a sociopath they are, will sooner or later give themselves away with their behaviour. At the very least they have a shoulder tick, count their steps or lurk in corners.”

The nut job

Monday, 10 February, 8:30–8:45 p.m.

He had his back to the door, holding his breath and eavesdropping. His palms were sweaty, ice-cold, his fingers numb. He tried to bend them, clench them into a fist, extend them. He couldn't do it. He couldn't manage even an ordinary major scale right now. He rubbed his sweaty palms on his trousers. A little better. He ran his hands through his hair. He tidied his Liszt-like hair. He tried to suppress his shoulder tick. He raised his hand up to his mouth and breathed out. Took a whiff. Realised he was nervous and tried to calm himself down with meditation. He closed his eyes, focused on his breathing. Inhale ... exhale ... inhale ... exhale. His mind was still scattered. Maybe it was not the right moment for meditation. But meditation was meant precisely for moments like these. *Realising that your mind has wandered away and refocusing your attention on breathing without criticising yourself is the key to practising meditation for mindfulness.* One more time. He clenched his teeth. Inhale ... exhale. And again, inhale ... exhale. And again. And again. And ... For a moment he checked out. He felt calm. It was enough. He opened his eyes. The door recess in which he was hiding was as deep as the thick walls of the hundred-year-old building. More than half a metre. Then he leaned forward carefully and stuck his head out. He looked up and down the hallway. Arches, big windows on one side, door recesses on the other. Radiators, white walls, notice boards, smooth grey slabs. And large round lights on the ceiling. At the end of the hallway was the volute of the steel staircase railing. No one in sight. And no one was expected to show up. But screeching and squeaking filled the hallway. Behind each door was a classroom, a worn oak parquet floor, a chair in the middle, and on it a miserable pupil, struggling, sweating and making endless mistakes, trying to get the instrument that they were holding in their hands, squeezing between their legs or clenching with their neck to produce more than an insufferable whining. But there was no sound coming from behind the door behind his back. Luckily. He had had four lessons that day, which he managed to survive.

Anej Nemeth hated teaching, hated the school and hated the children. He hated them from the bottom of his soul, as deeply as he, on the other hand, loved music. And he hated himself. He hated himself because there wasn't even a hint of godliness in him. He hated himself because he lacked that something extra, that final touch that would allow him to reach the last rung on the ladder. To play the notes, melodies ... and create music. Art. To be able to bring out the tragedy that his music would transfer onto others, to make the audience cry with him, laugh with him, suffer, hope. To perform worldwide, receive standing ovations, be invited to play concerts. And, last but not least, to have an agent who would book his performances and to be able to live off music, for music and with music. Not this. Not this shit. What good are the endless years of schooling, thousands and

thousands of hours of practice, years and years of sitting with an instrument, if the only thing he has to show for it is teaching untalented children whom he would rather drown in a spoonful of water, them and their stressed-out parents who torture him, make his life miserable and—so painfully—remind him of his own fate. What he wouldn't give to ...

Anej Nemeth is completely right to mention godliness. It is true that he lacks the spark of brilliance but he is not without an ear for music. On the contrary, his pitch is near perfect. That was also the reason why his parents enrolled him in music in school when he was not even four years old, why they constantly encouraged him and cheered him on and, instead of getting a new car—as things progressed—rather bought their son a first-rate violin. His perfect sense of melody and rhythm was also why all his teachers encouraged him on his musical path. And why, in the end, he himself started to believe that he was special.

Anej tensed up. His sensitive ears had detected a change. Something had disappeared from the painful cacophony of the sounds of violin, trumpet, cello, flute, guitar, piano, harp and percussion, mixing and bouncing off the walls at the end of the hallway. Still a cacophony, but slightly different now. Something was missing. Anej detected the difference immediately; he could hear it and see it. It was as if someone had taken away one of the colours of the rainbow. Not the mixed colours, one of the primary ones. Like yellow. Which would immediately have an effect on the others; not only yellow, all the greens and oranges would disappear as well. Anej pricked up his ears even more. Yes, the cello had gone quiet. That was what he was waiting for. He tensed up even more. His indignation vanished in an instant. He directed all his attention elsewhere. He assessed the situation. It would take approximately four minutes for the ten-year-old girl to put her instrument into its case, stuff the sheet music into her bag, make a note of her homework and reach the door. It was show time. He felt himself getting an erection. He swore. Not now. He listened and waited. A door opened. A child's voice, a quiet *goodbye*. Steps echoing down the hallway. Small, child-like steps. With a tempo of 110, 115 BPM. Soft slaps of rubber soles. Coming closer. Anej pressed his body into the corner wall even more. A little girl skipped by. Didn't see him. The steps slowly died away on the staircase. A door slammed. Silence. And then steps again. These sounded harder, larger, adult-like. Long-legged. He knew them well. He could vividly imagine the shape of the feet and the shoes causing it. Half-boots, grey, smooth leather. With a tempo of 85 BPM. As usual when she walked down the hallway. A little faster on her way into school and a little slower on her way out. Except when that policeman of hers was waiting for her outside. Then the tempo goes up to a hundred. The steps were coming closer. Four, five, six, seven. Closer and closer. Three more metres, two, one. This is how a blind person must perceive space, thought Anej Nemeth. When the foot hit the floor right next to him, he cunningly sprang out of the recess.

Giotto and da Vinci

Monday, 10 February, 8:30–9:00 p.m.

“Listen, Martin, now that Kralj is gone: it doesn’t have to be two of them,” said Ivana. “We could be looking for one person. Someone who is totally nuts *and* devilishly clever. You know, a genius and a nutjob, all in one.”

“I know,” said Vrenko. “Matjaž needs to have things simplified a bit. But I agree. Say that it’s someone who is enough of a sociopath to be able to slit a man’s throat and write *fuck you* on his forehead and, at the same time, is very intelligent, clever and has, at least in some areas, above-average skills.”

“And who could that be?” asked Breznik.

“Too soon. We can discuss that when we have suspects. And we don’t have any yet. Or do we?”

“No,” said Breznik. “So far, we’ve checked the usual. We’ve made a detailed timeline. Knez arrived in Ptujška Gora at 9 a.m. His driver let him out in the courtyard outside the church. He was greeted by the locals, the parish priest, two other clergymen and two altar boys. The latter two took his vestments. Then the driver parked the car and went on a stroll.”

“Where did he park?” asked Vrenko.

“By the cemetery. From 9 to 11, the bishop was in the company of his hosts in the church, and when they let the parishioners in, he was in the vestry where they got him ready for Mass. Between 11 and 11:30 a.m. he performed the service. I was there and there were no deviations from his usual sermons. As usual, his preaching was committed, deeply devout and came from the heart. At 12:40 p.m., he and his entourage left for lunch at the village tavern. He spent the time between 2 and 3 o’clock among the parishioners in the square and outside the church. He shook hands with them, talked to them, even took photographs with them if they insisted. He would spend a lot of time at these community gatherings but didn’t like to be the centre of attention. His interactions were known to be relaxed, easy-going and spontaneous. Many people also wanted him to hear their confession. He didn’t officially do that, but he would take advantage of such gatherings to spend a moment in private with individual believers. Older female parishioners were especially fond of dragging him away into some faraway corner and hogging him for themselves. But most people contented themselves with a touch, a stroke or a blessing from him. He always nurtured this bond with the people when he offered Mass. At 3:15 p.m.—give or take a few minutes, the statements differ with regard to the exact time—he retreated to the vestry to rest and pray for a while. He was always alone during this time.”

“Was he in the habit of locking his door during prayer?”

“Never. The door was closed, but not locked. The whole process was part of his regular schedule that was part of an established protocol. It was no different than a million times before. He usually ended his afternoon seclusion at 4 o’clock when he emerged from the vestry or any other room he was given. Then he and the driver would say goodbye.”

“Alibis?”

“We checked everyone in his circle: the parish priest, the clergymen, the altar boys, even his driver.”

“Opportunity?”

“Anyone could have done it. People were moving around, no one was paying any particular attention to the others’ comings and goings. But knowing where the bishop was resting, they more or less avoided the back rooms.

“And the pen?”

“You mean ...?”

“Yes, what was the writing on his forehead done with?”

“A permanent marker. Felt-tip, eight millimetres thick. It was lying next to him on the floor, right by the table. Bloody. No fingerprints, genetic testing is still underway. It was used to write short notes. It was kept in the vestry, among other pens in the pen holder on the desk, for all to see.”

“So the murderer brought the murder weapon with them, but not the pen. They just happened to see it and use it. What does this tell us?”

“That they came there with the intent to commit murder, but not to write on the body,” said Breznik.

“What do the others think?” asked Vrenko.

It was quiet for a while. All the detectives were still in the office, with the exception of Kralj and Lesjak. Kralj had lost interest when he felt that the photographs and the rest were safe. Lesjak waited a minute, then said that he could barely stand as they had spent the entire night in the lab and it was nearly nine, so he was going to get some rest.

“If this was in May, it would have been possible that he didn’t even come here with intent,” said Breznik.

Vrenko laughed, and Drago turned to Breznik. “Care to explain?”

“Yes. Based on the spores of chanterelles and those others we found, they most likely used the knife for mushroom picking. So, they could have had the knife on them to pick mushrooms and not to cut the bishop’s neck.

“Charbonniers,” said Drago.

“What?”

“Those other mushrooms were charbonniers. Less popular, but better than yellow chanterelles. And I keep my mushroom picking kit in the car at all times, even during the winter. So, it needn’t have been May.”

Miloš looked at Drago. “And what is a mushroom picking *kit*?”

“Besides the appropriate shoes, clothes and a hat, tick repellent and a book with mushroom descriptions and photographs, you need a sharp knife, a hard and a soft brush to remove earth, a soft cloth, a pocket torch and a small wicker basket. For the meagre amount you are now allowed to take from the forest.”

“So, it needn’t have been May, I stand corrected,” said Breznik in a friendly tone.

“Anything else or shall we call it a night?” asked Vrenko.

No one objected. They had been at work for fourteen hours.

As they were leaving, Breznik walked up to Miloš and whispered to him: “And what about that thing?”

“What thing?”

“You know, the look.”

Miloš smiled. “Tell them and we’ll see what they think.”

“What?” asked Ivana who was the closest. The others listened in.

“Just a moment,” said Breznik and bent down to the drawers of his desk, unlocked them, took the folder that Lesjak had left from one of them, opened it, skimmed through the photographs and pulled one out. It was a photograph of the right wall of the vestry. There was nothing interesting about it, so it had been left out of Lesjak’s earlier report. It was not sprayed with blood, there was no furniture and no objects that could be deemed important, only two paintings hung on the wall. He showed the photograph to the others.

“Pretty famous, these paintings, at least one of them,” said Ivana.

“Yes,” said Vrenko. “Reproductions, but rather good ones. To the left is Giotto’s fresco from the Scrovegni Chapel portraying the kiss of Judas.”

“You’re good,” said Ivana.

“Short-term memory,” said Vrenko with a smile. “Mojca dragged me to Padua last year. And I think everyone knows the painting on the right, da Vinci’s *Annunciation*.” He turned to Breznik. “Why are you showing this to us?”

“We checked where the victim’s gaze was directed, what he was looking in the last moment of his life.”

“Why?”

“He had a rather unusual look,” said Miloš.

“And?”

“He was looking at this painting,” said Breznik, pointing at the *Annunciation of the Virgin Mary*.

It went quiet for a while, as if everyone was waiting for him to continue.

“And?” asked Drago.

“And nothing.”

“Well, does it mean anything?”

“I don’t know,” said Breznik. “We want to know what you all think about it.”

“Are you joking?”

“No.”

“I think it’s right that you mentioned it, but it doesn’t mean anything,” said Ivana.

Nika was silent. She agreed with Ivana that any information that was uncovered during an investigation, no matter how trivial or outlandish, should be shared. Then everyone waited to hear what Vrenko had to say about it.

“Martin?” said Ivana.

Vrenko started.

“Yes?” He looked at them as if he had just come back from some faraway place.” “Oh. Great. I think it’s great. I think it’s excellent that you noticed this.”

Breznik was happy to be praised. It occurred to him that it was more Miloš’ doing, that he hadn’t contributed anything; if anything, quite the opposite. He had been pretty sceptical of Miloš’ idea at the beginning. But seeing as Miloš wasn’t showing any intention of telling the others about it, he didn’t think it was necessary either. But Vrenko’s response surprised him. And not just him.

“Seriously, Martin?” said Ivana. “A message from a dying man communicated by his last look? Secret meanings in da Vinci’s painting? Isn’t a desecrated body of a bishop enough, do we really need to drag Dan Brown into this? Are you serious?”

“We can’t take such fairy-tales seriously,” said Drago, “we’re detectives, not...”

Vrenko raised his hand and shut him up. “How seriously or unseriously detectives take Dan Brown is completely irrelevant,” he said, “this is not even about us. What matters is how seriously Ignac Knez took him.”

AVGUST DEMŠAR

THE CHURCH

(Synopsis) Spoiler alert!

The Church is a typical whodunnit crime novel. The crimes once again take place in native Slovenian surroundings, mostly in the fictitious village of Vodnjaki, where it seems that a special type of evil resides. The tenth, jubilee novel by Demšar is more extensive, the story is more complex and the side stories are even more surprising. The author lures us into a whirlwind of events and holds the reader in suspense even when he delves into the relationships between his mainstay characters known from his previous novels and their characterisation.

It is Sunday, 9th February 2020, and the minister at Ptujška Gora, an old pilgrimage church, Tomaž Ocvirk is anxious about the special day that awaits him and his congregation. The bishop Ignac Knez is to visit and attend a major church event, he is also to offer a mass. Humorously they refer to Knez as the Bono Vox of the Catholic Church. After lunch the bishop requests to retreat to the vestry of the famous Basilica of the Virgin Mary the Protector at Ptujška Gora to meditate in a personal prayer.

Later that day the chief investigator Miloš receives a call from his much younger colleague Marko Breznik, who urges him to take a drive up to the very same church. As the colleagues enter the vestry, they encounter a dreadful sight. At the floor of the vestry lays a male body in church clothing, covered in blood. His throat has been slit from one side to the other and the investigators conclude that the blood must have splattered all over the room as the victim was waving around in agony. But this is not everything: the most troubling thing is that the murderer has written a clear FUCK YOU! on the victim's forehead.

The murdered cleric was a very important man of the church, he was an individual of the highest moral principles and a role model. He had many followers and he was an open critic on the misdeeds of certain church people. The criminal investigation had to be done correctly and discrete, the reputation of the late bishop Knez was at stake. And not only that, the investigators are aware that the whole congregation of the Catholic Church has set their eyes upon them. The biggest puzzle of all is, who would murder such an important man and furthermore, wait out long enough to make sure he dies and then scribble a curse on his forehead?

The seriousness of the crime as well as the importance of the victim lures the chief inspector Kralj and the head prosecutor in the case Levstek to put pressure on the main inspector Martin Vrenko and his team. It seems that the matter is handled by the highest authorities at the Ministries of the Interior and of Justice itself. It is but only by Vrenko's reputation as an incisive and wise detective that the case wasn't taken from his team and appointed to the National Bureau of Investigation. A great part in this matter has been played by the young and ambitious prosecutor Levstek, who isn't famous for his wits, much more so for his cunningness. He is the one, who utters the most important words that illustrate the complexity of this case: "Listen, you can't fuck this up, this isn't local politics or financial crime, it's even way beyond the mafia. This is serious, it's the Church."

Another investigator with a special reputation is the before mentioned Miloš. Perhaps it's not his wits nor his wisdom that made him famous, but he is known for getting things done. He is intelligent, no doubt, but unlike Vrenko impatient and aggressive, if something gets on his nerves. This is a sign of passion, passion for his work, because he's good at it and passion for the people he cares about, his co-workers and above all his girlfriend Tanja. Tanja is a music teacher at the Conservatory of Music and Ballet. At a certain point on the 10th February 2020 she gets invited by her colleague Anej Nemeth to have drinks after work. Tanja, fond of the colleague at first, accepts the invitation, but later on as their discussion takes a totally bizarre turn and Anej tries to kiss her, she turns him down, which triggers a psychotic reaction in Anej. He flees to the toilet and Tanja leaves the bar. Since they were the last guests the waitress finishes up and goes to clean up the toilets, where a big surprise awaits her. The backdoor of the bar is open and somebody scribbled something on the mirror. In big red lipstick letters it says: FUCK YOU! The girl takes a picture and posts it on Facebook.

Tanja is upset about the incident with Nemeth, but doesn't want to trouble Miloš with it, he has a lot of work to do. She wants to forget what happened and decides to surprise him. She visits a real-estate agent and enquires about the possibility of buying a holiday residence. The agent suggests a quiet village, up in the Pohorje hills not far from Maribor, called Vodnjaki. Tanja immediately drives up to the village and is surprised by the loveliness it pictures at first sight. She is even much more surprised by the fact that she sees Miloš's car. It turns out that it belongs to a man, who reminds her of Nemeth and she leaves in a hurry.

Meanwhile the detectives start their investigation at the most obvious place, at the seat of the archdiocese of Maribor. Knez was living there between 2008 and 2011, then he was summoned to the Vatican. Later on, the archdiocese entered a critical time and had to face accusations of financial embezzlements. The investigators were assured that the tragically deceased had nothing to do with the accusations nor was he killed because of this. Miloš uses an excuse that he needs to visit the toilet and takes a look around. In front of the toilet he meets a person that suggest Miloš should talk to a monk called father Jakob, who was sent to an isolated monastery in Austria.

Upon returning to their offices the investigators have to flip through 370 GB of photo and video footage from the Sunday event at Ptujška Gora. They received the data from numerous followers who came to Ptujška Gora to see the bishop and shared their pictures and videos when the police asked for it. Once again Miloš's car reappears in one of the photos.

While Breznik and Drago are taking a close look at the video-photo-footage Vrenko and Ivana are heading towards the crime scene at Ptujška Gora. Immediately after their arrival minister Ocvirk addresses them with an urgent matter. He takes them to the Winter chapel outside the church and points to a certain object hidden behind a statue of the Virgin Mary. There is a plastic bag and in it a yellow disposable raincoat covered in dried blood. Unfortunately, the priest can't remember who closed up the chapel Sunday evening.

As the team takes a closer look at the photos in front of the Winter chapel a shadow of a person appears in one of them. It is a series of selfies made by two teenagers that finally gives the killer away. Unfortunately, the detectives can't make much out of it, but one thing is for sure, the killer holds a plastic bag in his hand.

Father Jakob was an old friend of Knez and much like the others not willing to speak open-heartedly and free-minded upon the detectives' visit. But as Miloš and Vrenko confront the priest with his appearance on one of the Sunday-photos, he opens up. He explains that Knez had no connection to the financial misdoings of the archdiocese, he wasn't there for the financial matters. But since neither him nor father Jakob couldn't keep silent about the misdoings, they eventually had to leave the archdiocese. Jakob was sent to this monastery in nowhereland, Knez on the other hand, who was much more prominent, called to the Vatican.

Miloš didn't hear from Tanja for a long time. Last time they spoke was on Sunday before the event with the bishop. When there was no word from her until Friday, he decides to check up on her. After visiting her apartment, he becomes worried and asks his colleagues for help. Breznik and Drago go to the conservatory and learn that nobody has seen Tanja since Monday, her student Anja directs the investigators in Nemeth's way. Miloš on the other hand visits the orchestra rehearsal, which Tanja was supposed to attend. The last time she was there was Monday. Breznik and Drago drive to Nemeth's home address, but he is not at home and the detectives leave. After Miloš receives a worried call by his co-worker Ivana he learns that Tanja was inquiring after a real-estate agency. Miloš drives to Vodnjaki and asks around about her there. He learns that she indeed visited the village, but there are no clues of her still being there.

The first part of the book ends with Tanja being kept in a dark, underground space, barely aware of her surroundings. The only word she hears loud and clear is the name Miloš.

On Saturday early in the morning a sleepless man takes a walk with his dog. He usually takes a stroll around the park in front of his apartment building, but this morning he encounters a dreadful sight. A partially naked female is laying on the ground and her wrists have been cut open. The man begins to tremble and tries to decide what to do. He waits a bit and as he takes another look at the body realises that the body has moved. Shortly after Miloš receives a phone call and he learns that Tanja has been found. He enters an apartment next to the park to find Tanja in a bad shape, but at least she's still alive. Later on, the dogwalker explains how he found Tanja and brought her home. As soon as she was able to speak, she asked for the police.

The medical examination reveals that Tanja was dehydrated and bruised, but she wasn't sexually assaulted, though in bad psychological condition. She was in shock. In this state of mind, she utters a series of unrelated words, which Miloš connects to the events from the previous days. And once again he makes his way up to the village of Vodnjaki.

At the house of Bogdan Kidrič, the man who owns the same blue pick-up as Miloš, an investigation takes place. They find the man in company of two other women, who he claims are his neighbours. A darkhaired one, who is called Mija Babič and a blonde by the name Ana Levec. The investigators soon learn that Kidrič's house does not offer much possibilities for keeping a person locked up. It doesn't have a basement at all. Miloš reluctantly gives in and accepts the fact that Tanja's abductor was still on the loose. As Miloš visits Tanja later on in the hospital she can't remember the past few days.

On Sunday, 16th February, a week has passed since the murder of the bishop and the investigators are not closer to finding the killer. But then a small string of luck touches detective Drago, who by accident comes across the Facebook profile of the waitress who works at the bar Tanja took drinks with Nemeth. He finds the photo of the scribbled FUCK YOU! across the mirror in the female toilet of the bar.

Breznik and Drago visit the bar and inquire after the writing on the mirror. The waitress remembers that the only visitors were a lovely and attractive female and a sloppy and fat man and she takes a guess that they both work as music teachers. The description leads the detectives on Tanja's path and furthermore, it takes them on a lead towards Nemeth. It turns out that the writing on the mirror was done by lipstick in the same colour Tanja uses. The investigators once again visit Nemeth's home, where they find a photo of Nemeth, his mother and the murdered bishop at the event at Ptujška Gora. Eventually, the detectives learn that Nemeth had kept Tanja in the basement of the apartment building he lived in. Nemeth is nowhere to be found, but the investigators are certain about him.

Eventually, they find him dead as he committed suicide. He hung himself in a public park in the town of Lendava, where he had a twin sister. Anej had mental issues and was being treated for them. But, later on the investigators discovered that he didn't take his medication, since he used it to drug Tanja.

Breznik finds the murdered bishop's stole in Nemeth's room. The prosecutor Levstek is excited about Breznik's findings, but Vrenko calls the theory a total rubbish. The investigators are faced with a big dilemma, officially the investigation is over, but unofficially both Vrenko and chief inspector Kralj agree that the detectives should move on.

In the course of the investigation Drago remembers two specific details in connection with their visit at Vodnjaki. He remembers that Kidrič was a passionate mushroom picker and that he drives the same car as Miloš. These facts are important because of two things: one, Miloš's car appeared in one of the photos and two, the carpenter's knife used to kill the bishop had traces of mushrooms on the blade. Obviously, Kidrič was at Ptujška Gora. Breznik and Drago take one more look at the photo depicting the killer and they realise that they only received photos from one of the girls, the other never turned her photos in.

Miloš and Tanja visit Vodnjaki to retrieve Tanja's steps in hope of her memory returning. There they meet Kidrič's neighbour Mija Babič and she tells them about the history of the house Tanja was looking at. Mija tells them the tragic story of her friend Ana's family. She was living together with her mother in the house next door, but she had no father. They were hardly getting along, but then Ana's mother, who is also named Ana, met a man she married and life became easier. A few years later the very same man named Darij Čeh committed suicide and no one knew why.

In the meantime, Drago and Breznik were scanning the other girl's photos and found out that there was no sight of the murderer's face. What they did discover is that both Mija Babič and Ana Levec were attending the church event at Ptujška Gora. Breznik delves into Kidrič's past even further. He finds out, how it came about that Kidrič bought his house in Vodnjaki. He offered an elderly couple

named Rozman the amount of 300,000 € (more than double the price it was worth), if they move out immediately. He also learns that he won the money in the lottery and that he is actually a millionaire.

The investigators are still not satisfied with the official version of the murder and Nemeth being the murderer. They are desperately trying to obtain certain documents from the Maribor archdiocese, but can't get them officially. Miloš and Breznik visit the archdiocese once again in hope of finding the same person who tipped off Miloš the last time. After a few hours of waiting the man reappears and tells the detectives the exact same story as father Jakob. Vrenko and Miloš doubt his sincerity and are still convinced that bishop Knez might have overheard something while living in the archdiocese thus being the true motive for his murder.

At the beginning of part 3 of the book the investigators are trying to turn a new leaf in the investigation and take a look at things from a completely different point of view. They remember a certain painting that was hanging on the wall of the vestry, where Knez was murdered, and the bishop's eyes were looking directly at it. It was the *Annunciation* by Leonardo da Vinci. It was finally time to take a closer look at this theory. The picture portrays the Virgin Mary being approached by the angel Gabriel, who announces that she will give birth to Jesus. Mentioning angel Gabriel's name triggers some memories with Miloš. He remembers Tanja speaking of angel Gabriel with pigeon wings. Tanja doesn't remember talking about the angel as they first approach her, but soon a déjà vu triggers her memory and she remembers visiting the church in Bistrica, the nearby town of Vodnjaki, where the angel Gabriel is portrayed at the front portal of the church.

Soon the investigators realise that the angel Gabriel is indeed connected to Knez. The man was appointed minister in the very Church of St. Archangel Gabriel in Bistrica. Vrenko talks to father Jakob once more, this time about Knez's period in Bistrica. Father Jakob confirms that Knez held a secret he called the mystery of Vodnjaki. It was in connection with a believer, who confided in the priest, but committed suicide in the end. Knez was faced with a moral dilemma of some sort, but father Jakob didn't know what kind of dilemma it was. He knew, that the man, who committed suicide did it by hanging.

Tanja has tried by the help of Miloš to remember her abduction. After a series of flashbacks she finally could remember being at Vodnjaki and then returning to her appartement. It was in front of her home, where Nemeth drugged her and then took her away.

Miloš wants to ease his mind of Tanja's abduction and starts looking for information on the internet about a man named Filip Furlan. He was the grandson of a couple living in Vodnjaki, who met Tanja on the day she went missing. Miloš finds out that Furlan posted a short story in the internet under a pseudonym with the title Biblical plague. It is a story about a small boy who is interested in frogs. His favourite place in the world is a small wooden area with a creek behind his grandparents' house. There he can observe all kinds of frogs, he spends hours and hours studying them and drawing them into his notebook. One day he encounters a dreadful sight. The area next to the creek is covered with disfigured frog bodies, who seem to have been tortured. Their legs have been torn off and they have been cut, some of the bodies still moved. It was a sight the little boy will never forget. From that moment on the boy loses his faith in humanity. Miloš instantly knows, who Furlan is talking about.

He shares the details of the story with his colleagues, as well as the information on the suicide. The piece of information he and Tanja retrieved from Mija Babič. They soon come up with the name Darij Čeh, the late husband of Ana Levec – the. The detectives are now focusing on the links between these events: torture of the frogs, suicide of Darij Čeh and murder of bishop Knez. They realise that every living or dead inhabitant of Vodnjaki needs to be taken into consideration. A big revelation is the fact that Knez married Kidrič and his ex-wife.

By now it is almost 1 month after the events at Ptujška Gora. When the detectives drive up to Vodnjaki late in the evening on Friday, 6th March, to talk to Kidrič they find his house empty. As they go looking for him behind the house, they hear an explosion. It's Kidrič's pick-up that bursts out in flames. On the sight the knife, which was used in the murder of bishop Knez, was retrieved by the forensics. They confirmed that the car was lit on fire on purpose. But Kidrič wasn't in the car, when it blew up. The investigators put out a warrant on Kidrič, who seems to be missing.

The knife they find in his car turns out to be the one, used in the murder of Knez. Last but not least, eventually Ana Levec – the daughter turns to the police and wants to shed light on the events of the church gathering. She points out the shift in behaviour Kidrič expressed on that day. Initially he was excited, but later on wanted to leave in a hurry. She also tells them that he visited a chapel next to the church before leaving. Later that day a hunter found Kidrič sitting with his back against a tree and with half of his head shot off with a shotgun. But the gun was nowhere to be found. A few days later it gets confiscated in a domestic dispute between a drunk male and his wife. It turns out that the gun was left behind by the couple Kidrič bought the house from, but they never changed the ownership. The drunk male found it as he was strolling in the woods and took it from Kidrič, who shot his own head off.

All again seemed resolved in the eyes of the prosecutor Levstek, who was eager to close the investigation a few times already. But the events on Wednesday, 11th March, again triggered the ever-so puzzled investigation, since somebody murdered Gianna Furlan (grandmother of Filip Furlan). The old lady was stabbed in the back 6 times, but the murderer left her disabled husband alive. The detectives circle around several questions, the biggest of all: How is this possible? The right question that they should be asking themselves is: When did it all begin? Vrenko seems to be the only one knowing the true murderer, but even he can't understand how.

The team searches the Furlan residence and finds an old sketch block, which once was owned by Filip Furlan. The block was empty, apart from the scribbles on the back pages, where Filip drew something, but then tried to erase it. The forensics reconstructed the drawings and silhouettes of frogs appeared and there were letters written on their backs.

Meanwhile a nurse from the hospital, where Ugo Furlan, the disabled, deaf and mute husband of Gianna Furlan, was brought, found a way to speak to the man. With the help of a special electronic device she talked to the man. The first word Ugo wrote on the screen with the help of his eyes was POLICE. As the investigators arrive the old man slowly explains what happened all those years ago. He admits that Čeh didn't kill himself, that it was them – the neighbours who did it. The reason for the murder was that Čeh was a bad person, Ugo called him a pig.

Furlan and a few others visited Čeh on the day in question at his home, they filled him up with alcohol and then they dragged him into the shack, where they hanged him. The motive: he was a child molester and little Ana Levec his victim. The detectives are not completely sure that Furlan told the truth, so they go and talk to Ana Levec – the mother. The daughter attacks Vrenko as he tries to take away her mother. They don't know how to fit her in the equation. So Vrenko takes another look at the pictures of frogs and puts the letters at their backs in the following order: DARIJ. Darij, the so hated man, turns up on the backs of the frogs' names' 2 years prior to his death. Suddenly the investigators realise that the timeline doesn't fit. How can somebody hate Darij Čeh so intensively even before he started to abuse Ana? It's time that the investigators talk to Ana Levec herself. They can't find her at home, when they arrive at the hospital, they find out that her mother is missing as well. The only place they could have gone to is the notorious village in the Pohorje hills by the name Vodnjaki.

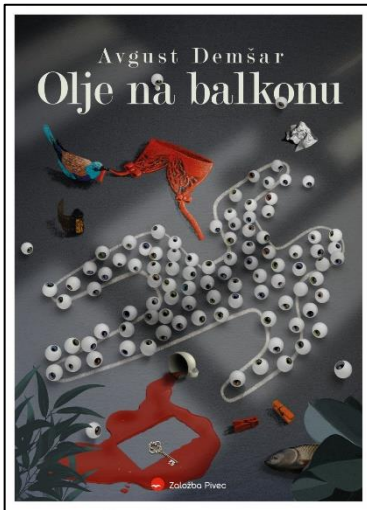
In the conclusion of the book we learn the truth about the murders at Vodnjaki. The girl Ana Levec had an unhealthy attachment to her mother. It was a sort of Electra-complex in connection with her. She couldn't stand the presence of Darij Čeh and she couldn't stand him touching her mother and having sex with her. She wanted to hurt him, but turned her rage against animals instead: the frogs, the priest's cat. Soon that is not enough and she comes up with a plan on how to kill Čeh, but not to take the blame. She turns the whole village against him, making them believe Čeh is abusing her. The only person suspicious is the priest Knez. The neighbours let their imagination get a hold of them and they perform their fateful plan and hang Čeh. Knez's moral dilemma turns up, his big mystery of Vodnjaki rises out of his fear, that he might have not prevented an innocent man from dying (he believes that Čeh committed suicide). Nevertheless, he goes on with his life, until after many years he sees a familiar face in the crowds.

It is Ana's face, he wants to persuade her to admit, what she's done, but she can't do it, she won't do it. She goes to Kidrič's car, takes out his knife and raincoat and enters the vestry. With one cut she slits the bishop's throat, waits for him to dye and then scribbles the curse on his forehead.

After the event her life goes on like nothing had happened, that is until detective Vrenko and his team come knocking on her door. She kills Kidrič and blames the whole thing on him. But that is not enough, there are still some witnesses like Gianna Furlan who could shed a light on the past. They need to be put out of the way.

Ana is very persuasive, if she wants to achieve something. It's easy for her to convince an orderly to help her get her mother out of the hospital. She takes her mother and drives with her up to Vodnjaki. There she puts her mother into bed and lights a fire, which swiftly consumes the whole house. The investigators arrive to late, both of them are already dead.

List of Demšar's titles

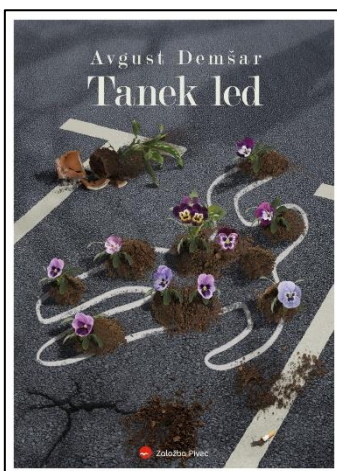


OIL ON THE BALCONY (2007, 2020)

Oil on the Balcony is an original Slovenian detective novel and also Demšar's debut book. It is the first novel in the series of cases worked by Superintendent Vrenko. In a block of flats by the Drava river where well-off people lived, a cleaning lady finds the body of Doctor Potokar in one of the flats. At first it appears to be suicide, but Vrenko and his young assistant Marko Breznik discover the doctor's colossal secret in a locked cupboard, a secret that incriminates many people...

RETROSPECTIVE (2008, 2020)

Superintendent Martin Vrenko is invited to the formal opening of a retrospective art exhibition of a deceased artist. There, the high society of Maribor and the artist's closest relatives are all present. The evening comes to an end with the treacherous murder of the artist's son, while soon after another body appears and one of the exhibited paintings is vandalised. The experienced detective, who was also interested in art and culture, looks through the dusty files of the artist's legacy and finds an unassuming exhibition catalogue by a young, unknown sculptor. He must travel to Trieste. Will he be able to piece together the puzzle?



THIN ICE (2009, 2020)

A new case for Superintendent Vrenko. In his third case, doubts about the circumstances surrounding the case arise in the minds of Superintendent Martin Vrenko, young Inspector Breznik and Chief Inspector Ivana Premk. All of a sudden, nothing is as it seems to be. The traffic accident in which a school psychologist loses her life turns out not to be an accident. The robbery in which the school secretary dies is in fact not a robbery at all. When a third member of the school's staff dies a violent death not long after, the crime investigators are faced with an utterly unpleasant question. Is it possible that a serial killer is loose in Slovenia?

EUROPE (2010, 2021)

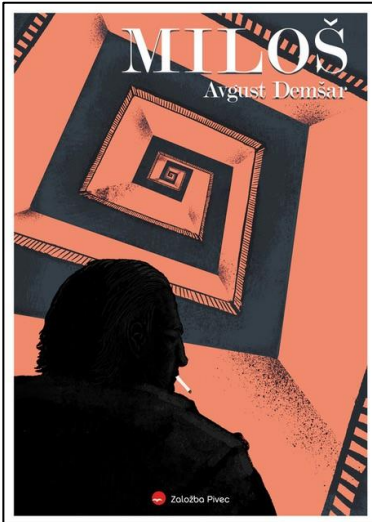
Autumn. Outside it's dark and pouring with rain. A black Mercedes speeds down the road. In addition to the driver, there are three other passengers in the vehicle. They were in Maribor for the first time, and two of them were in Europe for the first time. They soon reach their destination and the guests, tired from travelling all day, arrange when the driver should pick them up the next morning. They are all going to the international conference about the current state of Europe and among them is one of the most notable guests, star of the conference Kevin Douglas. The next morning a fisherman finds a body in the Drava river. This is how the investigation into the murder of Douglas begins, led by Superintendent Martin Vrenko with his two colleagues, the newly wed Inspector Marko Breznik and Chief Inspector Ivana Premk.

HOTEL ABBAZIA (2011, 2021)

Detective Superintendent Martin Vrenko had a few days from last year's annual leave to use up, so he and his wife Mojca set off on holiday to Croatia, more specifically to Opatija. The detective was enjoying himself on the beach, reading newspapers and watching the sea, but he soon grew bored. Then an article in the local newspaper about a crime that had been committed in Opatija caught his eye: Murdered wife then took own life. His dedication to his job and the boredom he was experiencing led him to become increasingly interested in this case...

OBSESSIONS DURING THE CRISIS (2012, 2022 – reprint in the making)

Obsessions During the Crisis represents the conclusion of a series of six cases investigated by Superintendent Vrenko and is, as yet, the most extensive cyclic detective novel in Slovenia. The story begins when the decomposing body of a businessman is found at a popular destination for day trips. The cause of death is an insulin overdose which resulted in an insulin shock and death, while the circumstances of the murder turn out to be exceptionally complex. Before the surprising unveiling of the murderer, the author runs down a list of suspects – the victim's father Aleksander, the victims stepsisters (greedy Petra and her husband the lawyer, anorexic Iris and her partner), the victim's widow Sabina and his roommate at the Livada Care Home. But who did it?



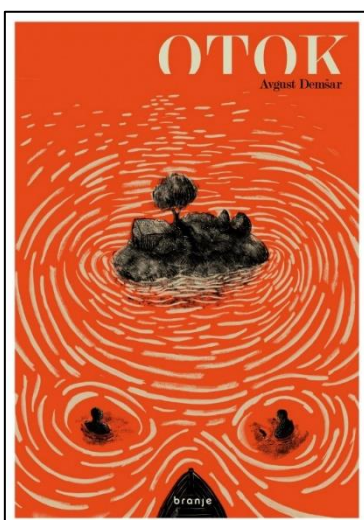
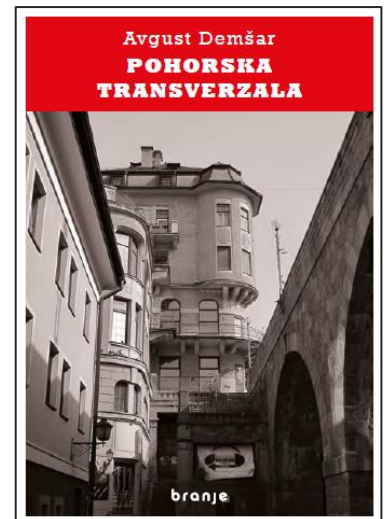
MILOŠ (2013, 2021)

With this novel, the author introduces readers to a new detective. Miloš is more modern, maybe more “American”, but also more mysterious, complex and far from perfect. Whenever the opportunity arises, he has no problem letting his fists do the talking. He is in the middle of a divorce and sometimes he also lies. Miloš must deal with the murder of a young Italian, a homosexual. Is it a crime of passion? Perhaps it is the result of prejudice against people of other sexual orientations?

THE TRANSVERSE TRAIL OF POHORJE (2016, 2022 – reprint in the making)

Demšar’s detective opus is conceived as a stand-alone series in which the fates of the main characters develop while the detective stories remain independent – to be enjoyed on their own as a complete story. Although the novel is categorised as a political crime story, it could just as easily be labelled as a psychological detective novel. What is more, the adjective political adds an element whereby a typical detective story becomes intertwined with the world of politics in which the investigation takes place.

A up-and-coming politician is accused of three murders. All of which took place within two weeks of his high school graduation reunion. Since all clues point to him, he finds himself imprisoned. But that is only the beginning of his story.



THE ISLAND (2018, 2022 – reprint in the making)

The Island is Avgust Demšar's ninth crime novel. For the first time in his literary career the writer doesn't follow his classical crime strategy of »who is the actor« used in his previous novels. This time he is following the idea of another sub-genre, this is the type of »the secret of the locked room« crime novel. In the first third of the novel the happening is put on an imaginary Island somewhere in Croatia, then it moves to Slovenia, to Maribor, where all his novels are taking place. The main emphasis of the text is given to the procedures, the criminalistic detection, offering the keys to the solution of criminal deeds. Again, there are several murders involved as well as fake and crucial hints and sideway investigations.

More to come:

- **THE CHURCH (2020) reprinted in 2021**
- **TYCOON (2022) NEW TITLE**
- **ESTONIA (2024) IN THE MAKING**