

The Magic of Kastav

By Melita Adany

Beola sat at the computer for full two hours, staring at the white screen. A blinking dash signified the space where the first sentence of her new story was to appear. But the story, surprisingly, did not arrive. And so for days. That had never happened to her before. Not to mention she couldn't remember the last time she had had a good night sleep. She pretended not to hear her mobile phone ringing because she couldn't accept the notion that her imagination box was suddenly empty. The computer shut down after a while and Beola saw her reflection on the black screen. It was a nice but tired face. Twenty years of work in kindergarten had left their mark. For years, she had been devising new games and stories for children, spending whole days in front of a computer. Now, it seemed, she had reached the wall. Instead of the story, she crept into her sadness. She needed a change but she didn't know what kind.

The mobile phone rang again, this time persistently, until Beola answered.

"Oh, finally I managed to catch you!", you could hear the cheerful voice of her friend Kristina even if you held your mobile phone a meter away from your ear. "We bought an apartment in *Kastav*, you have to come and see it today!"

Beola only now remembered the agreement. Ever since her best friend got married and had a baby, she has rarely seen her. "And you know, if you don't come - I'll get angry!" she added sharply. Beola looked at the white screen once more to see if by some miracle something had just been written by itself. Disappointed, she quickly got ready and left in her car.

The town located on a hill west of Rijeka, was only a fifteen-minute drive away. Along the way, she thought they could have chosen a better place to buy an apartment. What could be interesting there at all? Due to the 365 meters above sea level, it is certainly much colder in winter than in Rijeka. And now they have put the pillars on, so you can't get to the centre by car. Reluctantly, she parked at the foot and headed for the old town on top of the hill. Along the way, she heard grannies ("nonas") speaking the specific old Kastav dialect that has been preserved to this day. She paused to take a deep breath and calm her heart in the Alley of the Greats. It was a steep street with lined busts greeting passers-by. She recognized the bust of Vladimir Nator, a great Croatian writer who had been the principal at the Teachers' School in Kastav for 10 years since 1908. Below the bust, she read the names of three Istrian enlighteners from the 19th century: Vjekoslav Spinčić, Matko Laginja and Matko Mandić, to whom she briefly said: "What are you looking at? As if you had never been in an out-of-breath situation?!" And just when she wanted to read the name on the fifth bust, she heard Kristina's voice: "Here I am! Cooome!"

If her friend hadn't already noticed her, maybe Beola would have given up climbing, but now there was no retreat. She hurried up to Kristina who was waiting at Fortica, a place where there used to be a fort and today is a beautiful lookout point with benches for walkers under centuries-old wild chestnut trees.

"Dear friend, I'm so happy to see you," Kristina shouted and hugged Beola, who was trying to hide her puffiness, "Look at this view! This only is enough reason to come to Kastav, isn't it?!" And indeed, Beola had to agree. Beneath them, the sea stretched out like a silver platter in which Cres and Krk islands sought their reflection. On the east side, Rijeka spread like a double-headed eagle, and the slopes of Učka mountain raised above the west side of the bay. Beola remembered how many times she had walked to the top of Učka and had never been mesmerized like this. She realized that not only was her imagination gone, but her physical fitness as well. When? Where? Why? Kristina abruptly stopped Beola's moment of desperation: "If you only knew how pleasant summers are here! Due to the 365 meters above sea level, we spend summers here enjoying a pleasant breeze and watching from a high, how the city of Rijeka boils next to the sea! And it's great that there are no cars in the centre, so children can play freely and the air is clean." she continued and took Bela by the arm while moving uphill," but I'm not the only one who is delighted with Kastav. Do you know that Vladimir Nazor started writing in the old Kastav dialect just when he was working here? And the composer Ivan Matetić Ronjgov, you passed by his bust, was a great admirer of this area. You know, he stands behind the invention of the Istrian musical scale. There, all great people love Kastav!"

Kristina was bursting with positive energy and the redness on Beola's face finally vanished.

"Wow, is something going on here?" Beola remarked as a crowd of people gathered in the Town Lodge. It was the best-preserved stone building of its kind in Kvarner. It was built in 1571. There, in the Middle Ages, the citizens of Kastav were informed about all important events.

"Oh, something is going on here all the time. Concerts, exhibitions, lectures - and wait until June 6 on the Day of the Town of Kastav!". Kristina noticed Beola's stunned expression and realised she was not familiar with this festive day in Kastav and continued angrily: "Now tell me you have never heard of Bela Nedeja!" "I know that one," laughed Beola, "every year, my mom can't wait for the first Sunday in October."

Beola too likes to take a stroll through Kastav on Bela Nedeja, checking out the offer at the densely packed stands. As the event is dedicated to Belica, a type of wine, you can try and buy delicious, young, sweet white wine on every corner. It has been a long tradition. She remembered her childhood and how her mother bought her cotton candy and caramelized almonds on Bela Nedeja. Despite the scarcity, she always found a coin for a carousel or the purchase of "Cat in a Bag" (blue paper envelopes hiding a surprise for you, with a possibility of winning some great gift or something irrelevant). She remembered how willingly her mother went everywhere with her, and how she might have been in an out-of-breath situation too, but she never gave up. She remembered and was ashamed.

"Knock, knock," Kristina air-knocked under the large stone gates of the Old Town of Kastav, "You know, there used to be a huge wooden door here that would open at dawn and close when it got dark. Wasn't it cool!"

"Dear, the present is also cool. We have lamps and we don't need such thick walls with six towers to guard the city. And witches are no longer burned on the tower...", the two friends laughed and moved

on towards Kristina's new apartment. They chose the most beautiful objects or paintings in the windows of every atelier. They stopped in front of each poster with the upcoming events in the town. They photographed every cat sitting on the old stone steps. Beola put down her mobile phone and said in a serious voice, "You know, I've always wanted to visit the famous Blues Festival in Kastav."

"And? Why didn't you?"

"I don't know. There was always something else more important. Or I just missed the time."

"Here we are," Kristina shouted, "my flat is on your left. Above Lokvina Square."

"Lokvina...Sounds like a big puddle!*" laughed Beola. (**Lokva in Croatian is translated into a puddle, Lokvina being the augmentative.*)

"You are right! They used to collect water here back in the day. Since the fifteenth century, there is also a castle here, where the governors who ruled the town lived. The castle has been turned into a hotel in present times. Let's go!"

And exactly at that moment, Kristina's mobile phone rang: "Yes? Now? Immediately? Okay, I will be right there." she sighed deeply, "I'm sorry, I have to run off and pick up the paperwork for my apartment. I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

"Don't worry, do what you must, I will continue walking to Crekvina, it suits me."

Merged houses. Small windows protected by white, lace curtains. Wherever possible a vine grows, forming a natural canopy over the door. Stone, already worn-out slabs lead to the extension where the ruins of the largest church on the Adriatic are located - or at least it could have been. It was fifty meters long, twenty meters wide, and just as tall. It had five chapels on each side, and inside it consisted of eleven altars along with the main altar. Impressive, isn't it? The construction was started by the Jesuits in 1630. It was never completed. To this day, it is not known why. The remains of the western wall rise 10 meters and resist time. In the summer, this transforms into a stage for many performers. Local people do not give up. They get the best out of everything.

Beola looked at the imposing ruin and stared at the forest. Satisfied cyclists quickly disappeared in it. Parents read signposts with their children. Occasional walker with a dog. Their faces were relaxed and content. One dog was jumping, persistently trying to catch a twig on the bush. She always wanted to walk through that forest but she didn't. Why? She didn't know. She never had time. "Um, I have fifteen minutes, why not?" She thought and headed towards the forest. The fresh air she breathed cleared her mind. With each breath, she became stronger and on the other hand relaxed. And then something happened...she didn't expect it. A dog approached her with a red cloth protruding from its mouth. It sat down in front of her and waved its tail. She looked around but no one was near. "Whose dog is that? What's in its mouth?", she wondered.

"Shh, shh!", a voice squeaked from somewhere, "take it from him! Quickly!"

Beola instinctively took the red cloth that the dog had dropped from its mouth and happily ran away.

"Um, well, it's a small cap. She probably fell out from someone's doll," she thought. She moved on, but the voice stopped her again: "Give it to me! That is mine! Stupid dog!"

At first, she thought it was some kind of Kristina's joke. A little man was hanging upside down from the twig that was still swaying: "Why are you looking at me, you better help me straighten up! Stupid dog!"

"Who are you... or rather, what are you?" Beola didn't know if she had actually said it out loud or if this strange creature had read her mind.

"Come on, come on... as if you don't know who I am," he laughed, grabbed his red cap and put it back on his head: "Yuck, he drooled all over it again!"

Beola has heard legends about Malik, the good forest spirit who lives in these forests. She noticed that one of the pathways was adapted for children, so the visitors could read legends about Malik along the way. "Yes, yes," he continued, as if reading her mind again, "I have to hide better now, but the dogs are somehow always onto me. Goodbye!"

Malik ran off through the trees and without a second thought, Beola started following him. She followed him up until a narrow entrance to a cave and entered it without hesitation. The room was narrow and dim. She saw Malik already disappearing in the distance, so she hurried up. It was getting steeper so she had to use the help of her mobile phone light. She did not know how much time had already passed when a magnificent pit appeared in front of her. The glow of gold in it illuminated the tunnels that led to other chambers. Suddenly, Malik pulled her by the leg: "What are you doing here? You mustn't be there," and then rebuked himself, "How could I not hear her? I had to hear her! How could this happen? This is terrible!" Only now did he see that the dog's saliva had clogged his ears: "Oh boy.....this is not good, this is not good," repeated the little boy, spinning around in circles, and for the first time not knowing what to do.

"Don't worry, I won't tell a soul about your hiding place. Here, I'm leaving if you're angry," Beola reassured him. "No, you don't understand. You can't go out now! You are trapped in Šparužna jama. This hall lies 100 meters below the surface." Beola lost her breath. She looked up. The 10-meter-high ceiling from which the stone forms partially filled with water would have looked beautiful if she had not been in a hopeless situation. "Where do these tunnels lead?" she asked. "The tunnels are widespread under the whole town of Kastav and are even up to five hundred meters long. During the Austro-Hungarian Empire, these caves were open for tourists' visits, but I did my best to close them.", Malik added proudly and paused as if he was eavesdropping: "Quiet. If Hajds hear you, you're in trouble." "But," she restrained from screaming, "everyone will be worried because I'm gone! They will call the police! Look, I don't even have signal here."

"Well, you should have thought of that before following me. You are where you are. Anyway, tell me, what do you do there on the surface?"

"I write stories," Beola said, suddenly remembering the white screen. Malik continued shyly:

"You know, I'd like a story about myself, but I don't want to have a red cap in that story," he looked at his cap, which needed washing desperately, "Actually, I don't want any cap whatsoever...I want..." He came closer to Beola's ear: "You know, I'd like it if you wrote about...", Malik was getting quieter, "if it is possible, of course, I would be grateful... and in return, I will...", Malik whispered.

"I will see what I can do. How will I write if I am going to be imprisoned here forever?", Beola was saddened.

"Yes, I haven't told you, the door open every day at dawn and close at sunset. Yes, maybe I should have told you that first... Listen to my advice: never despair, but get the best out of every situation.", said Malik in a dreamy manner, while settling comfortably among the pearls in a golden bowl and falling asleep.

Beola's attention was suddenly drawn to the book with golden covers, so she started reading to pass the time.

"I had a good laugh today. The townspeople of Kastav got angry because their neighbours, the people from Volosko, a local town at the seashore, keep the best fish for themselves, and bring the remains up to them on the hill. They had decided that they did not need anyone and that they would plant the fish themselves. So, they started putting them one by one into the ground and wondered why nothing was growing. And when the land became invaded by worms, they decided that the fish had started throwing out small roots. Nonsense.

Captain Morelli was drowned in a puddle of water today because he wanted to change their law. Uhh. Do not mess with the people of Kastav."

Beola realized that she was reading Malik's chronicles and recognised the value she was holding in her hands. "This is a real treasure," she thought and continued reading.

"Hajds' big, arrogant giants have started cutting down trees in my forest. I tried to stop them.

Today I found out that the King of Hajds' son fell in love with a woman from Kastav and I thought that the story would have a happy ending. Instead, the king found them and threw them both into the dungeon.

Hajds were becoming crueller by each day. The crazy king got the urge to catch the Sun into a net! After he had succeeded, the Sun disappeared and the Earth opened up and swallowed everything, including me. Fortunately, I saved his son and his girlfriend. It gives me strength here, underground.

Today the cave door opened. Only good souls can pass through the door, so the evil giants Hajds cannot pass. I started going out regularly. It is no longer the Middle Ages, the war is over. People live in peace and happiness. Finally something good.

Today, a passer-by almost stepped on me. I have to be more careful. I see that they have cleared the forest and marked the trails. They even named one trail after me - Malik's trail. I am so cool! I would like so much for someone to..."

"Wake up!" Beola shouted, "you've slept all day, the door will close again!"

It was only at that moment Beola realized that she had fallen asleep with her head on the book. A girl stood in front of her.

"I don't remember when I slept so well. And who are you? Where is Malik?" Beola asked, still drowsy.

"I am Jelena. And Malik? Ah, who knows! He runs out as soon as the door opens! I doubt you'll see him again."

Beola grabbed the golden book, thanked the girl, and hurried into the tunnel. She overcame the uphill easily, not puffing this time. She was headed to the church, holding the golden book firmly in her hand. She saw her friend running towards her. Beola was worried: "Kristina must have gone crazy with worry by now.", she thought.

On the contrary, Kristina had a smiling face, as if nothing had happened: "Here, I told you I will be back in fifteen minutes! Now we can finally go to the apartment!"

Bella stared at her friend in astonishment and thought: "I haven't been here for two days!" She reached out to show her friend the golden book but there was only golden sunlight in her hands.

And just at that moment the bell on the church of St. Jelena, located at the highest part of the town, rang.

"I have to put on my sunglasses," Kristina joked, "you are literally glaring! I'm telling you, you have to come more often!"

As she was returning home, she felt happy for her friend, her beautiful little apartment, and Kastav, a town about which she had learned so much. She remembered all the cities she had always wanted to visit ... but she hasn't. She doesn't know why, but she knows she will fix this. From now on, she will get the best out of every situation.

Beola was sitting at her computer for two hours and started writing. Then she took a deep, contented breath and exhaled slowly. She stretched, packed her things in her backpack, and put the bike on the car roof.

"So Malik, where are we going today?", she laughed and left.