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THE STRONGEST THING IN THE WORLD

CHRISTIAN MICHENER

After tilting the empty ladle back upright, Nikola followed Petek around the furnace, leaving the slag for the others coming on turn. They couldn't hear each other over the roar of the hearth and cranes and strippers and dinky cars crashing along the rails. Nikola looked up at the sky through the windows and roof vents far above him and tried to figure out how much time he had left. Back home, maybe elsewhere in this country too, you could follow the sun and read the clouds and know the seasons from the trees and be able to get home for supper when the day told you to. But here time wasn't cut right. It was always dark—the lowering clouds, the long winter, above all the smoke from the mills and factories. The rhythms of sleep and seeding and harvesting and birth had been flattened under the weight of the steel they poured into ingots. To Nikola the mill was a monster propagating itself: steel making steel for more machines to make more machines.

"Don't be a jackass," Petek had said when Nikola had told him this. "It's for the railroads."

Nikola was relieved to see Petek waving goodbye to Riley. It was over, quitting time. "Don't be late," Riley said, as he did every day. It was one of the first English phrases Nikola had come to understand.

Across the yard the men stood in a long line, waiting for

their pay. You could feel the tension among them. Few understood the sliding scale that had led to fights between them and the superintendents, threats, stories in the papers of bombs being thrown and houses smashed with rocks. But they stood there dreaming, twelve of the best hours of the month, when their pay was new, all there, dreams of a bed set, shoes for the kids, relishing the taste of beer at the saloons.

The line shuffled along quickly. Men grabbed their pay, stepped aside, counted their money. Nikola stood behind Petek when he asked for both of their envelopes. Petek stuffed his under his arm and took a few bills out of Nikola's and handed the rest over to him. "For Berta," he said, as he did every payday. "Room and board."

"I can pay her on my own," Nikola said. "I'm good for my word."

"I promised her," he said.

"So did I," Nikola said. They had this fight every payday. It was thanks to Petek, a fellow villager from Czeke, that Nikola had come over several months before. He had moved in with Petek and his wife Berta, and each payday Petek took out the money himself for Nikola's board. Nikola looked at the numbers scrawled on the envelope and peeked inside at the bills. The older men mistrusted it, wanting metal they could weigh in their hands, the heft of real coin. Last week he had sat down at Petek's kitchen table and had tried to figure out the mathematics of his pay, the tonnage rates and his share of the pay out, minus the money Petek took for Berta and a fee—a bribe—he paid to Riley for hiring him. "I pay a man to work for him?" Nikola had asked.

"I pay a man for you to work," Petek said.

Nikola thought he had figured it out, but when he checked his math he didn't come up with the same numbers the next time. Now he stuffed his new envelope into his pocket and stepped in beside Petek as they headed for the opening in the fence built years ago to keep the strikers out. Nikola would

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have to move on soon. He owed Petek but felt he had paid his dues. Of course he said this every payday. Move to where? He was alone here in the country, except for Petek and his family and his cousin Andris, who treated him worse than the Americans. The men were spreading out before them now, passing through the fence, like debris on an ocean washing out to the horizon. Outside the gates, a huddle of women had assembled, wives making sure they got the money before the men drank it all away. "Berta would never embarrass me like that," Petek said. One man handed his envelope over and waited until his wife gave him a few dollars. Another couple wandered off, side by side, the wife yelling at the man while he stared straight ahead, ignoring her.

Wordlessly Nikola and Petek turned toward 8th, skirting the beggars who had assembled there for payday. After his first pay, Nikola had started to give them money when Petek knocked his hand away. "They make more than you do," he had said.

Nikola could already taste the sweet burning of the whiskey he liked. Petek preferred beer, lots of it. A few evenings before, after Éva had helped her mother take the drunken Petek to bed, she had come back into the kitchen. "What does it taste like?" Éva had asked, leaning in close to Nikola. He could feel the heat of her body. It seemed to have a shape of its own, the shape of her young woman's hips and breasts and arms. At work, above the molten steel, the heat had no shape—it was everywhere, relentless. Éva lowered her mouth toward his and he stuck out his tongue while she sucked on it, then pulled away quickly when they heard Berta coming back down the stairs. They had never touched before that and they stared stunned at each other until Berta came noisily into the kitchen.

This morning Éva had been making the lunches and handed him his pail. She ran a finger around her lips. She knew it was payday. "Save some for me," she had whispered.

Nikola felt himself coming out of sleep. He could hear Berta scraping the coal stove in the kitchen. One of the men he shared the room with was seated on his cot, pulling on his pants. Nikola kicked away his covers and felt in the dark for his own clothes. This was the worst time of day, when he wondered if he could go through it again. One morning he actually cried, silently, while the other men shuffled out of the room for breakfast. One of them, a fellow villager from Czeke named David, had paused at the door but had been too embarrassed to comfort him. Once at work it was OK, the way the fear and power of the place overwhelmed you, drove away the distraction that could kill you. He had seen it happen—explosions, acid, crushed to death by a falling ladle chain or ingot. Sometimes work made Nikola feel powerful, godlike, turning the earth to fire and the fire into steel. But here alone, in the cold morning, there was no fire, only him in the dark.

In the kitchen Berta didn't turn to greet him as he made his way out to the privy in the courtyard. He and Petek had stumbled home late the night before. Nikola had insisted on only one drink, then had a second one after an hour of Petek's teasing. By the time they left Petek could barely stand. He ranted all the way home, cursing Roosevelt, the mill, the boarders in his house, Berta, women. "And my daughter, she'll be the same, I'm sure," Petek had said. "Don't you think? Like Berta. Like all women. The good and the bad of it. You want the good, you have to take the bad. You want what they have, you have to take what they give." He stopped and spit into the gutter and held himself bent over, breathing hard, as if rambling on had exhausted him.

Berta had been standing inside the door when they tumbled in, her arms folded across her chest. Éva was sitting at the table, sewing. She didn't look up. "Take him upstairs," Berta told Nikola.

"I'm hungry," Petek bellowed.

"Go on, Nikola," she said.

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"You come, too," Petek yelled to his wife. He looked over at his daughter. "You stay here," he said to her. "Come on, Berta."

"Go on, you pig, get out of here," Berta said.

"Oh, I'm the man when it comes time to work but not anytime else, eh? That how it works?"

After Nikola had helped Petek into his bed, he had come back downstairs. Éva was gone. Berta put a piece of pork and potatoes on the table. "It's cold," she said. "Are you drunk, too?" Nikola shook his head and sat down to eat. After he finished he went across the courtyard for a game of cards. In the middle of a hand of *ferbli* he heard shouts and curses from outside. On payday there were always commotions—people screaming, fighting, laughing, chasing each other. Once a troupe had come in to set up cockfights. But this time he recognized Petek's voice. He headed into the courtyard with the others and saw him holding Berta's head down by her hair and swinging his fist at her. It struck wherever it landed—the side of her head, her shoulders, her back when she tried to turn away. Éva rushed out of the house and grabbed her father's arm and he threw her aside. Nikola rushed toward them but others got there first, pulling them apart. "Stupid bitch," Petek yelled.

The women took Berta away, huddled around her, while the men tried to calm Petek down. By tomorrow most of them wouldn't remember it, or wouldn't remember which couple had been fighting. Nikola watched Petek shake off the other men and stomp back into his kitchen. Éva, leaning against the house, refused to look at him. He started toward her but she whirled away and ran inside, the kitchen door slamming closed behind her.

At St. John's on Sunday, Nikola stayed in the back. He was exhausted, with only three hours of sleep, but he couldn't bear wasting his one full day off this month as he switched to night

lull. Two weeks from now he would pay the price: shilling over to the day turn by working 24 hours straight. He could see Petek, Berta, and Éva among the crowd, up close to the altar. Éva's white scarf floated like a flower in a puddle, bobbing in the dark water of the heads of the others, brighter even than the gold of the icons, dimmed in the smoky shadows on the walls.

It made Nikola sad to come here, to the church, to hear familiar chants and prayers, so much like home. Just outside, the scarred hillside of the town, the stunted trees, the dark, brooding sky, mocked his memories of the pastures and hills where he had grown up. Everyone said it, all the time, the longing for another world, the old world, though their talk always ended the same. "But what would you do?" they'd say. "There was nothing back there." They were right. Just memories, Nikola thought, good and bad, mostly bad. A familiar place to suffer, cold and hunger. Plus there were odd success stories, like his mother's young cousin, who had come here and opened a dance studio. Nikola had written to him on his way here, but Andris hadn't come to get him at the station. Since then they had met up once or twice in town, but they had little in common. "Send Andris my love," his mother would always write.

Outside the church Nikola started up the hill toward the city center. Éva had said she wanted to talk to him. As he climbed he ran his tongue around his mouth, remembering her sucking on it in her kitchen. Beneath him the hill dropped away into the town's brown carapace of roofs and roads, and then before the river, merging with the smoke, splayed the long flat black torso of the steelworks. People were emerging between the towers of St. Mary Magdalene's, spreading out through the park across from the church, and Nikola walked among them, looking for Éva. He found a family picnicking and realized he had brought no food. He bought a pickle and some cheese from them but said no thank you when they invited him to sit and join them. Then he saw Éva making her way across

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the park with another woman. As they got closer he realized they had already met and he wished he hadn't come.

"You remember Ms. Hentfield?" Éva asked.

"Of course," Nikola said, lifting his hat. Riley had told the crew they weren't to talk to her. When Nikola first met her, in Petek's kitchen, she had said she was part of a study of the steel mills and the towns around them and the city of Pittsburgh. "To see how everyone lives," was how Éva had translated it. But some of the men seemed to think Ms. Hentfield was a spy for the company. They gave the same advice as Riley, but for different reasons. "You talk, you'll walk," they said. "You'll never work again."

"She was wondering if you would answer some questions about work at the mill," Éva said.

"My English is not good enough," Nikola said.

Ms. Hentfield watched the two of them talk, smiling back at them. Nikola could not afford to lose his job. He'd be blackballed up and down the valley. And if Petek found out? Ms. Hentfield had come into their kitchen to talk to Berta about how much everything cost. Éva, with the English she learned in school, had translated. Berta kept a notebook of expenses, food and gas and rent, and how much she charged the boarders, and Ms. Hentfield had written out copies of it while Éva explained each of the women to the other. When Petek came in, he was furious, scattering the papers all over the floor. He told Ms. Hentfield to get out and never come back. Nikola knew that Berta now snuck her ledger out of the house and met up with Ms. Hentfield somewhere in town.

Éva grabbed Nikola's forearm as it hung low above the hand holding his hat. "I told her you would speak to her," Éva said. Her hand seared him through his Sunday coat. He saw the family from whom he had bought lunch across the field, the children running in some game while the parents watched them. "Go through those trees," he said to Éva, nodding to the oaks behind her. "I'll come around and find you."

In some ways Nikola liked the night turn better. Making steel was about dark metal and fire, steam and smoke, a kind of hell, and night was closer to hell than day. Hell had no time but if it did it would be night, always night. Steel should be made in darkness, lit only by its own making. At night the furnaces felt to Nikola like a powerful secret that only the few like him could possess, kept away from the dreamers in their beds in town. He had wanted to say all of this to Éva, but he had been afraid of what she would think, of how his thoughts would get lost as they went over into English and then into Ms. Hentfield's looping script. She would be writing, writing, but what? What did it say? What kind of fool would he look like?

Instead he answered all her questions as briefly as he could. He tried not to make it sound bad, just in case she was a spy. One night he had seen three men from the adjoining furnace beating a drunk in an alley. Petek had stopped him from stepping in. Nikola knew the man on the ground, bent over the bar every night. The story was he got paid by the company, to sit and listen, to come up with names, anarchists and union agitators, whiners, bad-mouths.

Nikola and Éva and Ms. Hentfield had sat on the grass in the shade of the trees. Harder to be seen there, but the grass was wet, the air cold in the early spring. Nikola had explained about the twelve-hour shifts, the twenty-four hour turn when he switched from day to night. When asked if he understood the wage scale, he said yes, because he remembered once he did, the night he figured out his pay. About his living arrangements he said that Berta was very fair, always did what she promised. "Of course Berta is Éva's mother," he said, making them all smile. What did he do for recreation? He had to stop to think about that one. He had wandered once into the library and asked for a book in Hungarian but couldn't read it. When he had brought it home and showed it to Éva, blushing at his ignorance, she had laughed. "It's Lithuanian," she had said. "No

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wonder you can't read it!" There was the nickelodeon, especially the 5 cent nights, and he liked cards and to listen to old songs.

The more they talked, the less worried Nikola had become. But he also grew more confused. What was the point of this, taking down his days? "What are you going to do with all this?" he asked.

"They're doing research," Éva answered, without even translating. She seemed to understand the purpose, and believe in it too. She was defying her own father in being here. There were others like Ms. Hentfield. Nikola had seen a photographer in the courtyard once, and had stepped back into Berta's kitchen not to be seen.

When they were finished, Ms. Hentfield shook his hand, said something to Éva and then walked away down the hill. They watched her figure grow smaller. When Nikola reached out and put his hand on Éva's back, she didn't move. Slowly he moved his hand to her elbow and led her into the grove and pushed her up against one of the trees and lowered his face as she raised hers. It was as hard to breathe as above the molten steel, where there was no air. At last she pulled away and put her head against his chest. After a minute she slid out from under his arms, shook her fists happily at him, under a smile he laughed at, and then ran away. Since Ms. Hentfield had left, she hadn't said a word.

Nikola asked Riley how much more he owed him. "Owe me for what?" Riley yelled. You weren't supposed to talk about the bribes to get on the mill shifts, certainly not in the yard, but Nikola didn't know what else to do. Petek was still taking money out of each of his paydays to pay Riley.

"Do I owe you any money?" Nikola asked, trying again.

Instead of yelling at him, Riley's face relaxed. He licked his lips and shook his head. "No, you stupid hunky," he said, "you don't owe me any money." He patted him on the back. "You're

a good worker, Nicholas," he said, tapping a finger on his own head now, "but your upstairs is pretty empty."

Nikola laughed, not because it was funny, but because he understood what Riley was saying. On the next payday, when Petek asked the clerk for their envelopes, Nikola yelled over his shoulder, "I will get my own."

"Just give me both," Petek said to the clerk.

"I will get my own," Nikola said again.

The clerk handed Petek his envelope and then held Nikola's out uncertainly. Nikola stepped around Petek and took it himself and put it in his pocket without looking at it and started his way out of the yard as Petek stepped in beside him. "I need your board," he said.

"Berta asked me to bring it to her," Nikola said. His legs felt stiff, from the twelve-hour turn and the fear of what Petek might do. The man was drunk more and more now. Even in the morning Nikola could smell it on him. Berta had told him not to give any money to her husband.

"It's my house," Petek said.

"I will pay. I always pay," Nikola said.

Petek turned in a flash and took up a handful of Nikola's collar and began pushing him backward until Nikola caught himself enough to push back. Petek held Nikola's chin thrust upward. "Damn right you'll pay. You'll pay all right," he said. "I'll make you pay for everything." His face was brick red, with specks of spit on his lip. He seemed to have no idea what he was saying. Other men had slowed near them but didn't step in. "Let's go, Petek," one of them finally yelled. With one final push Petek let Nikola go and started off with two others toward the gate. Nikola walked behind them but instead of going to 8th with Petek he wandered up the hill. Soon he passed his cousin's dance studio. Through the windows he could see figures moving around inside, and he headed through the door and up the stairs. Andris was moving gracefully around the floor with an older woman, dressed in a large

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white skirt and a small hat that trailed a curling white feather like a cat's tail. Two other women sat primly off to the side, watching and smiling. The dancing woman saw Nikola first and faltered, and when Andris asked what was wrong, she pointed across the room. "You are interrupting a lesson!" Andris cried.

"It's me, Nikola," he said.

"I don't care if you're the King of Prussia," Andris said. "You can't interrupt me." He excused himself from the woman and hurried across the floor.

"I want to buy some dance lessons," Nikola said. "For two of us."

"There are no times available," he said.

Nikola tapped his pocket, where the envelope was. "I have money," Nikola said. "I will pay like everybody else."

"You will not pay like everybody else," Andris said, pushing him backward. "There are no times available. Please, stop interrupting us." As soon as Nikola was in the hall, Andris shut the door on him. Nikola could hear him say something, and then a burst of laughter from the ladies.

The courtyard was brighter than usual when Nikola entered, the late spring sun higher in the sky. It did little to lift the sting he felt in his heart, the humiliation from his cousin, his own family ashamed of him. Pots and pans rattled from the kitchens, and a little girl stared at him while she pumped water into a bucket. A boarder from another house, late for his shift at the mill, came running out of the house lifting up one of his suspenders. As soon as Nikola got in the kitchen, he took out his envelope and counted out money for Berta. "This is what you've been giving Petek?" she asked. He had tried to figure it out on the way home and thought he had gotten it right. "It was for Riley, too," he said.

Berta stared at Nikola. "It wouldn't surprise me that blood-sucking Irishman took your money," she said. "But your own people?"

"Riley says I owe him nothing," Nikola said.

"You haven't for a long time," Berta said.

They both stared at the money on the table and seemed to think the same thing. It should all be his, money back for what Petek had been stealing.

"Take it," Berta finally said.

Nikola shook his head and started out of the room, but Berta called him back. She scooped up some of the bills but left others on the table. "I won't take what's not mine," she said. "I have pride, too." She nodded to a pot on the stove. "That water's warm," she said. "There's more on the porch. You should wash." She was taking down her ledger from the cabinet where she kept her accounts. "Éva went to the store," she said without looking back. "She should be home soon."

A few hours into his turn Nikola was working by himself under the ladles. He didn't mind the molten metal underneath him in the channels or molds or at his legs from the open hearths. But he hated the machines above him, the cranes and hooks, the cars on their ramps. He feared being crushed from what he couldn't see.

Petek should have been there with him. Always two. That was the rule. No man alone for safety. But Riley had sent Petek home. Too drunk to work. No one had protested, though it left the crew a man short.

When Nikola got home that night, only the other boarders were in the house, all seated around the kitchen table. "Berta's across the way," David said.

"What's wrong?" Nikola said.

"Nothing," he said. "Though Petek's in jail."

"Now he has to pay room and board," one of the men said, and they all laughed.

Petek had left the mill and headed straight to the saloon. Nikola could picture the rest of the story, a fight or falling down drunk in the street. He sat down and took his own plate

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for the meal when Éva came in the door. "Ms. Hentfield's here," she said.

"Who's that?" David said.

"She said she'd like to ask you some more questions," Éva said to Nikola.

"She shouldn't be here," Nikola said. The other boarders looked at him warily. They knew now who she was. Why was Éva putting him on the spot like this? "Your father doesn't approve," he said.

"Are you afraid of him?" Éva said sarcastically. "And haven't you heard? He isn't here at the moment."

Where had this spite come from? Nikola sat back in his chair as Éva's cheek and mouth shuddered, then she turned and ran out of the house.

"You better make sure she's all right," David said.

Nikola checked in a few of the other houses, but no one had seen Éva. He was heading across the courtyard to another house when he ran into Ms. Hentfield. "Where is Éva?" he said.

She started to answer him but he could follow nothing of what she said and grew furious, as strangely angry as Éva herself had been a moment ago. In her arms Ms. Hentfield held a pile of papers, and Nikola could see charts with numbers on them; expenses or populations or family sizes, he had no idea. Numbers and graphs and boxes. He snatched the papers away and shook them at her. "This is us?" he yelled. "What language is this?"

Ms. Hentfield held her arms up, shrugging, confused about what had set him off, what he was saying. She didn't yell back or try to grab her papers. Finally she said something softly, and reached out her free hand. Nikola's shoulders collapsed, and he gave the papers back. People had collected at the doors and were staring at them. "Where is Éva?" he said again.

A little girl standing by the edge of the courtyard pointed down the alley. "She went out to the street," she said.

Nikola went with his instincts and started up the hill. The

night was coming so early, no time for a young woman to be out. Within twenty minutes he spotted a white figure coming back down the street and stopped. Éva's arms were folded across her chest. She came right up to him and stepped inside the arm he held out for her. "We must tell my father," she said.

Nikola knew she was talking about them. "There's no reason not to," he said, and he led her back down the street.

The night had drawn full dark by the time they went down the alley, past the back door of the stables and into the courtyard. The smell of the horses and privies and garlic and cabbage and flour and gas got trapped here, and Nikola held his breath each time he walked through. In the courtyard odd shapes of light fell onto the ground and against the walls of the houses from the gas lamps and coal stoves and candles. It was like a ghostly silent echo of the mills, with the dancing of diminished fires on the soft dirt.

Nikola was holding Éva's hand as he pulled open the kitchen door and saw Petek sitting at the table, glaring at them. He looked grey, heavier after only one day. Who had gone to get him out? As Petek stood up and started toward them, Nikola felt Éva try to move forward, to get between him and her father, but Nikola held her back. He braced for the punch, but Petek stopped, snorted, and spat at the floor between their feet. Without another word he turned and went up to bed.

The next morning Nikola walked to the mill alone. He said no special goodbye to Éva, only what the others did, to Berta, too. Riley was laughing when they arrived, joking with some Welshman, a foreman on another crew.

The first pour came earlier than Nikola had expected, but maybe time was only moving faster. He watched the furnace bleed and the molten metal, like a long, venomous flower, bloom into the runners on its way to the ladles. He was turning to work it down over the molds when he suddenly felt himself

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tumbling toward the fires, toward his death, and he screamed out in terror. The fear shot up through him, indistinguishable from the heat. But not tumbling, pushed. A man on top of him, Petek, his breath foul as new-made metal. He had meant to push Nikola right into the steaming slag left at the bottom, but in his clumsiness had fallen and was now scrabbling wildly on top of him, trying to keep Nikola from standing and at the same time pushing him toward the channels. Nikola, stronger, younger, wormed his way out, and managed to get both of his legs against Petek's side. One push. One push and Petek would tumble over and be done. Nobody would see. Another accident, a tragedy, surely what Petek had intended all along for Nikola. The others were intent on the ladle and the pours.

But Nikola held back. Soon men were running over, grabbing the two of them, pulling them apart, Riley stomping in behind them, furious, red as a pepper. "Everybody back to work!" he yelled, and they started off, drifting back. "Not you," he said to Nikola. "You're done."

Nikola protested, following Riley the whole way around the side of the furnace. From deep across the yard a train engine crashed into something left on the tracks and men started yelling at each other. "He tried to kill me," Nikola said.

"Drunken hunkies," Riley said.

"I'm not leaving," Nikola said, fighting with his English.

"You're not?"

"I'm staying," he said. "I worked fair." He could see two mill guards making their way across the ground toward them.

"Get out."

"Kill me," Nikola said, though he had no idea what it was supposed to mean. It was something between a curse and a threat. It wouldn't even have made sense in Hungarian.

By now the guards had arrived and Petek had made his way around the furnace, too. Riley nodded toward Petek. "Throw the drunk out," he said to the guards. He grabbed Nikola by the elbow and pulled him over to another furnace

After a while Riley thrust Nikola forward. "Work here," he said. "Any mistakes and I'll kill you." As he spoke a worker from the other crew walked past them, heading to where Nikola had been. A trade then.

"Thank you," Nikola said to Riley.

But at the end of the day Riley took him aside outside the gates. "That's a new job," he said. Nikola blinked back at him, confused by what the man meant. "Bring your money tomorrow," he said. "And don't stare at me like that."

"You cannot buy my face," Nikola said.

Riley shook his head. "Mother of God," he said, "you people never make any sense."

The whiskey at Toohey's tasted sweeter than usual, maybe because of how horrible the day had been. The bartender asked if he wanted another but Nikola said no. Maybe this is what had happened to Petek. You don't tumble into a hole but bit by bit, day by day, you step down into one you dig yourself. To walk up is too hard but you have to keep moving so you go further down instead, end up like Petek.

Nikola had to figure out where to go. He'd wait till dark and then sneak back to the courtyard and try to get Éva's attention to get his things. And then what? He'd ask Andris, he'd have to. He knew no one else. When he got to the studio he could see Andris's back to the windows as he stood there clapping, giving instructions to someone beyond Nikola's view. At one point Andris turned and glanced down. He looked surprised, then curled up his face and flicked his wrists, shooing Nikola away, like he was a bothersome fly, an annoying child. Then he turned back around and started clapping again, to music Nikola couldn't hear.

Nikola turned and marched up the street, desperate now, unsure where to go, but as he turned the corner, he saw Éva, stepping down laughing out of the doors of a hotel a block

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away, while behind her, laughing too, came a man in a suit. Nikola was too surprised to move. Éva saw him then, as did the man, and Nikola turned and hurried away. He felt like he had on his first hour at the mill, at the disbelief at what life held in store for him. "Nikola," he heard from behind him. "Nikola, wait!"

He walked faster but Éva caught up with him and grabbed his arm and turned him around. As she did he saw over her shoulder that the man in the suit was with another man, and with them both was Ms. Hentfield. "I work for them now," Éva said. "I translate for them." Nikola was stunned to see her left eye shrunk inside the swelling of a blue and black bruise. He lifted his hand to touch it. "Don't," she said, and grabbed his wrist. She cupped both her hands around his and brought them to her lips. "Here," she said.

The next day at the mill Nikola waited for the pour at the door of the hearth. He wondered if Petek was at the old furnace across the way, if he had managed to get his job back. He hoped so, for Berta's sake. They would need the money. But if they crossed paths in the yard . . . how could he not hit him after what he had done to Éva?

The night before Nikola had spent the night on the floor of the photographer's room. Nikola had asked him to take his and Éva's picture, and he took out some coins and offered to pay for the photo right then.

"No, Nikola, I can't, please," Éva said, turning his face toward her with her hand so that he saw her eye. "Not like this."

"Then you," he said, nodding to the artist. "You can draw us."

"Of course," the man said.

"No, Nikola, please," Éva said.

"It'll be fun," Ms. Hentfield said. "Come on, Éva."

With his finger, Nikola drew a circle around his eye. "Not

The artist nodded. "Not that," he said.

Nikola could feel the body of heat emanating from Éva's side as the two of them sat stiffly beside each other on two chairs, staring straight ahead. Soon she pressed through that heat, leaning her shoulder against his. After a few minutes he lifted his hand and lay it on her thigh, and she put her hand on top of his. All the while the artist's face didn't change. He glanced at them, sketched, glanced up again. When he was done he handed the picture to Éva while Nikola looked over her shoulder. It was done in pencil, and its shades of grey and black and white space made them look fierce and strong. Nikola was surprised at how old he looked, pleased at how Éva's eyes lit up on the page as they did when he looked at her, before her father had hit her, had swollen her one eye shut.

Nikola reached into his pocket and held out his money to the man. The artist shook his head. "It's a gift. To Éva," he said.

Nikola put the coins down on the table. "I want it to be a gift from me," he said.

Everyone stared at the money a moment. "All right, then," the man said. "I'll take your money. It will be your gift." Even as he said it Nikola knew that the coins were not enough, nothing compared to what the man would normally charge, and he felt a small bloom of humiliation course through him. As if she knew it, Éva took his arm and squeezed.

Nikola felt the first hard thrusts of the pour as the hearth slid open. He had to forget the night before, the humiliation and the promise of his and Éva's picture, clear his head of everything before the danger of the molten metal leaking out. After their picture he had gone back to the house to get what was his. Petek was seated in the kitchen, unshaven, his face sallow and sweating. Nikola, his stomach in knots, had walked in without a word and went straight past him. When he came back Petek hadn't moved, and Nikola stopped at the door. "I

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won't make you pay me back for what you stole," Nikola said, "but if you hurt her again, I will make you pay."

Petek scoffed at him. "You think I'm scared of you?" he said. "I've eaten people twice your size for breakfast."

"I don't care what you think," Nikola said. "I'm just telling you I'm not scared of you."

Let it go, Nikola told himself—Petek's final curse, following him across the empty courtyard, even the soft glow of Éva's upturned cheek in the picture. He had to look ahead now. Only last week two men had been killed on the far side of the yard when acid poured on the metal had exploded. Now the head of the orange sluggish liquid blossomed into the space before him and began to slide toward the ladle. Carefully, Nikola watched it descend into the bowl, watched the heaving black slag bubble to the surface and over the lip. A false move, and it could kill him. Had he fallen in when Petek had pushed him, they might not have even found his bones. How had such fire ever made him think of Éva? But if he were careful he could make it do what he wanted. With such fire he could transform the crude, dusty rock ripped from the heart of the earth into the strongest thing in the world.