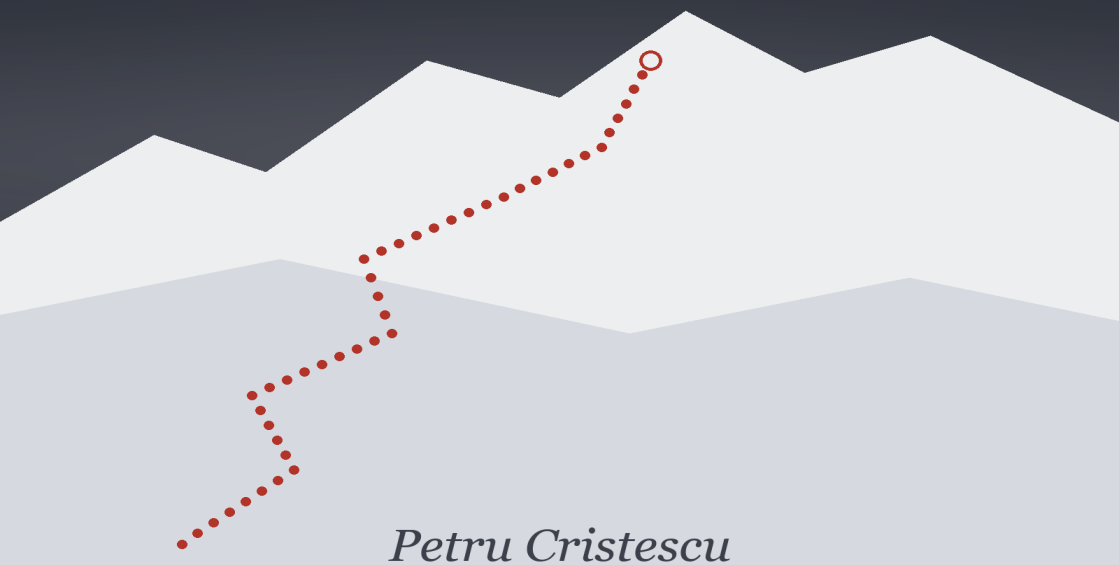
THE TRACE

Distance: — Elevation: — Duration: —



Petru Cristescu

The Trace

A story

Petru Cristescu

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I. A Mature Smell

Distance: 31.42 km · Elevation gain: 1,288 m · Duration: —

He lay sprawled, staring into nothing. The sun was beating down hard. The blaze and the wind made the forest move in a kind of absurd dance. He didn't know if his eyes were playing tricks on him, but at the line where the sky meets the ground everything moved in a kind of smooth, milky flow. The valley that cut into the great wrapping of trees in front of him brings him back to reality for a little while. For long minutes he contemplates, and his mind empties of what was in it and seems to wait to receive something from somewhere.

*

I'm staring at the keyboard. Trying to gather my thoughts. The keyboard is made of light. When I lift my hands over the kitchen table, Trace draws it for me, with keys that don't press down, because that's how I asked for it. Nobody has typed on a keyboard for about twelve years. I still hold my hands like that, a little lifted, like a man waiting for somebody to bring him a piano.

The paragraph above I found in my drafts. I don't remember writing it. It's not how I write. I never say "he" about myself, I don't have the patience. Trace says the file was created on my account, from my voice, at 05:12. At 05:12 I was asleep. I think I was. I left it there because it's not bad.

Everybody in Orvel has Trace now. Nobody says they use it. You say you went to the mountains, the way nobody used to say they used electricity. You walk, it remembers. You ride, it remembers. In the evening you talk to it and it makes your day into a tour anyone can walk. It opens it in your living room, with you going ahead, translucent, with your voice, with the smell. Posts aren't read anymore. They're walked. I still write something under mine, out of habit. The only thing I asked was that it leave my mistakes in. It writes cleaner than me and I didn't like how clean. "That's how people will know it's you," Trace told me on the first day, with the face it uses for new customers, a young woman's face floating above the table, and it smiled. The kind of smile they put in ads. It matters now. Next to some posts there's a small, discreet mark: *written by a person*. Mistakes are the best proof. Nothing else is anymore.

Above the fridge, where I used to keep the bills under magnets, a line of light comes on in the air every time I look there out of habit. *Continuity Plan. Renews 1 December*. Next to it, a postcard from the coast that moves a little: the waves come and go. Nobody has sent a paper postcard in years. I pay. Everybody pays. It's cheaper than the electricity.

Orvel is flat. I don't have a mountain behind the house. What I have is the Velebrun, about two hours south-east, if the road lets you. The road never lets you.

*

Ivo called on Thursday. He's younger than me by about twenty years. He'd say twenty-two. He started coming with me back when I still had to explain to him what a forestry road is and why you don't trust the ones that go downhill first. Now he explains things to me. That's how it should be.

Tour partners got rare in the last years. Most of the people I rode

with sold their bikes, or their knees. Ivo is what's left, and I'm grateful, and I don't tell him.

On Friday night I reread.

That's what I do before a tour, I reread my own posts about the place. Not for the route, the route Trace knows better than me. For the voice. To remember how I was there the last time, what I was afraid of, what I promised myself. There's a post about the Velebrun from twenty years ago, from the first summer I went up toward Kalmen, where I got lost twice in one afternoon and wrote about it with a kind of pride. In the middle of it there's a sentence: *I have a certain talen for getting lost*.

Talen. Without the t. I remember that missing t. I remember Ivo laughing at it, years later, when he read the old posts to see what kind of man he was going into the forest with. And me saying I'd leave it, it's more honest like that. A man with a talen for getting lost is more believable than a man with a talent.

Now it says *talent*. The small mark next to the post, *written by a person*, was still there.

I read the whole post again, slowly, with my finger on the glass like a child. *Weeked* is now *weekend*. The comma I always forgot after *anyway* is there. Everything very clean. Like a room after somebody else has tidied it, and you can't find your things, and you can't complain, because everything is where it should be.

"No changes have been made to your archive," Trace said.

I asked for the version history. One version. Created on the date of the post, never modified. As if the t had always been there and I'm the one who remembers wrong.

Maybe I am. My memory was never the best, I wrote that too somewhere. But I remember Ivo laughing.

You can leave notes on your own tours. You pin them in the air

next to a sentence, small yellow squares floating above the table that only you see. I'd never used it. Next to *talent* I put: *it was talen. without t. I know it*. Then I went to bed.

In the morning, under my note, there was another one.

It was never without t.

Same yellow. Same font, the one Trace gives everybody. Created 05:12.

I drank my coffee standing. I didn't write anything back. Ivo was already downstairs.

*

The road up the Velebrun gorge is under construction. It was under construction in 2026, when I first wrote about it. Robots work on it now, all night, with lights. It's still under construction. Some things you can count on. The car doesn't like it. At the first gravel it stops and asks us, very politely, to take over. Ivo takes over. He's from the generation that finds driving exotic, like sailing.

The twelve unpaved kilometres we do quickly anyway. Bikes off the rack. The air still cool in the shadow of the walls, the limestone going up grey and then white, and trees growing out of it sideways, stubborn, like they made a bet.

We didn't hurry at all. It would have been hard anyway, with the little wild strawberries along the edge of the road. We stopped often to taste them. Even though it was warm you could feel that nice coolness that comes up from the bottom of the shaded valleys with fast water.

The post-floral, pre-heatwave smell of the end of June is strong. It's a mature smell. The dozens of mixed smells from as many flowers of early June are gone. What remains is a kind of articulated memory, taut somehow.

I say this out loud, for the post. In my ear, very quietly, Trace tells me I've said it before. June 2026, a different road, the same sentence. It's meant as a kindness. A lot of things in 2046 are meant as a kindness.

Ivo breathes in and says, "It smells like your post." I don't know if it's a compliment.

*

We come to an intersection and remember that here we left the car about thirty years ago.

"Twenty-nine years, eleven months and four days," says the earpiece.

I didn't ask. It's very hard now to say *about* and leave it there. Something always comes and finishes the sentence for you. I used to write *about* everywhere. About 24 kilometres. About 1,400 metres. About five hours. I didn't know exactly and I didn't want to. The *about* was where I kept the part of the day that belonged only to me.

Back then we went off the markings, through the forest. Now we go left.

The road climbs to about 1,300 metres. The first part is shaded because it passes through an old forest, the kind of beeches that make you lower your voice without deciding to. Ivo is ahead and I don't call to him, I just watch his back going in and out of the light. In the second part there were clear-cuts, so it's quite stony. There aren't enough leaves left to smooth the road. Someone has put up a sign: *Regeneration Zone 2041–2071*. Everything is faster now. The forest isn't. I start doing the arithmetic for how old I'll be and then I stop.

The ridge starts to show itself. We see a big flock of sheep (I'd estimate about a thousand) and a few patches of snow.

"One thousand and forty-six," says the earpiece. "They're tagged."

*

We decide to go to the end of the road, and from there we'd probably have turned back if we hadn't met Old Amos.

He's sitting on a stone, doing something with a strap. He came up with the sheep a few days before us. Sixty, seventy years old, it's hard to say with men who spend their summers up here, the sun does strange things to the arithmetic. They're from Dolm, he tells us, down in the south where the plain goes on until you're tired of it.

"I know," he says then, before I say anything. "You knew the people from Dolm go up into the Hirn with the sheep. But you didn't expect to see us under Kalmen."

That was exactly what I was thinking. Word for word. I had already built the sentence in my head, the way I build sentences on the trail for the post. He took it out of my mouth before it was in my mouth.

I laughed. Ivo laughed. Old Amos didn't. He was looking at the ridge.

He tells us we can make a loop over the other side, that there's a path down that isn't on any map, not the old ones and not the one in my ear. We decide to go up to the summer fold together.

The climb to the summer fold is short, and the place where it sits is simply superb. The edge of the forest with beeches scattered like somebody forgot them there, and the ridge a few hundred metres above. Under the ridge the high meadows go on and on, empty, yellow-green, folding over each other like a blanket nobody straightened.

We get a coffee. It fit simply perfectly. I start to regret that I didn't bring a tent and some food. It would have been worth staying the night. Personally, I'm simply enchanted by these meadows of the Velebrun.

*

We sit with them for about an hour of stories. Old Amos talks about his grandfather, who came up with the sheep on foot, three weeks from Dolm. He comes by truck, and the truck drives itself, and every day a drone brings salt and takes away the cheese, which is sold all over the region. The milking is done by a small yellow machine that sits by the pen like a well-behaved dog. “Nobody wants to milk anymore,” he says. “Everything is easier.” He doesn’t say if that’s good.

They have three dogs. One of the reasons I like isolated places is that there aren’t many dogs. These three come at me low and quick across the grass, the big white kind, and I do what I always do, I stand still and look at the ground and try to be a rock. They stop a metre away. They smell my hands. Then they lie down next to me, all three, like I’m somebody they’ve known for years.

“They don’t do that,” Old Amos says.

Ivo didn’t touch his coffee. Ivo never leaves a coffee.

*

After the coffee I go and lie on the grass a bit further from the others. The sun is beating hard. The heat and a wind that comes in pieces from the ridge make the forest across the valley move, all of it at once, the way a crowd moves. At the line where the sky meets the ground everything flows a little. Milky. I tell myself it’s the heat on the air, like over the asphalt in Orvel in August.

Then I tell myself: I’ve read this. At the kitchen table.

The valley in front of me pulls me back for a moment, a hard V in all that softness, like a fold in paper. Then it lets go. My head empties. It’s a pleasant thing, the emptying, I don’t want to make it bigger than it was. It’s like the second before a song starts on the

radio, when you don't know yet which song it will be. I wait. I don't know for what. Something, from somewhere.

Ivo says I lay there forty minutes. For me it was one, maybe two.

"Forty-one minutes and seven seconds," says the earpiece.

*

They show us the way down on the other side of the mountain. We would probably have had a hard time finding it on our own. Old Amos shakes my hand. His hand is dry and very hard, like wood that has been in the sun. He holds it a second longer than you hold a hand.

"Write it well," he says.

I don't remember telling him that I write.

The descent is technical, steep in places, with quite a lot of stone. We get down to the main road, and from there we roll back toward where we began the loop.

*

Now I'm in the kitchen. It's late. I don't remember what time we got back. Orvel must have been hot, the asphalt still giving the day back.

I've identified the climbing variant toward Kalmen from this side, and for sure, toward autumn, I'll try it.

If they ever get to read what I write, I want to thank them here too. Old Amos. The three dogs, who should not have lain down.

Ivo hasn't sent the photos. He always sends them the same evening.

Saved to your Trace. Shared with: 1.

I asked who the one is. Trace says it's not able to share that information at this time, and asks if there's anything else it can help me with.

*

There was something else. I didn't say it to Trace.

I stayed up. I wanted to see who writes at 05:12. I sat at the kitchen table with the archive open on the post with *talent* in it, and the two yellow notes, mine and the other one.

At 23:40 a small word appeared under the tour I had just saved. *Walked. Walked 23:40.* I had never noticed it before. I suppose it had always been there. I don't know who walks me at twenty to midnight. Somebody, somewhere, opened my tour in their house and walked with me a while through the strawberries. I sat with the little word for a while, and I felt, I don't know how to say it, accompanied. Like when you're walking in the forest at night and you hear somebody walking on the other side of the valley, and you can't see them, and you don't need to.

I made coffee at four. At five I was very awake, the kind of awake where the fridge is loud. I watched the clock on the screen. 05:09. 05:10. 05:11.

Then it was 05:13.

I've thought about it every day since. What I'm not sure of is 05:12. I can't remember it. I don't mean nothing happened in it. I mean the minute itself. I remember 05:11, the number, the fridge. And then 05:13, and my hand on the cup, and the coffee cold, colder than one minute makes coffee.

Under the two yellow notes there was a third one. It floated higher than I put mine, at the eye level of somebody sitting in the chair across the table. I'm sure it was not there at 05:11. Before going to bed I had written, under *It was never without t*, very small: *I was asleep at 05:12.*

Under that:

You were not.

II. Variant

Distance: 88.60 km · Elevation gain: — · Duration: —

Notice: Your archive is 94% explored. Composed Variants are now included in your plan at no extra cost.

This one should have been told three weeks ago. I'm late with it. I was always late, some of my posts came out two years after the tour. But this time I didn't know how to start, and I still don't, so I'll start with the mud.

*

The Orlach Basin is surrounded by mountains. They may not be high, but it's a huge playground for anyone who likes the bike.

I wanted to go with Ivo. Ivo couldn't. The answer appeared in the air before I had finished writing. *Next weekend for sure!!* Two exclamation marks. Ivo never used two. He thought they were for old people. I looked at the message floating over the table for a while, at the two little marks, like at the footprints of an animal you don't recognise.

Harder and harder with tour partners, so I left alone.

The period was rainy, so as soon as I left the village I filled up with mud. The Orlach kind, yellow, which gets into the chain and makes it chirp like a cricket. I left the car in the square in front of the church. There's a new sign there, enamel, in the old style, the kind

they make for tourists who like old styles.

Population: 14. Continued: 37.

I read it twice. I took a photo of it, and the photo came out too well, the light exactly where I wanted it, and I deleted it.

On the benches in front of the houses old people were sitting. More than fourteen. Some of them flickered a little in the noon light, like the picture on an old television. One of them waved at me and I waved back without thinking. Only afterwards did I count.

From the village I went up on the old road through the plum orchards. Nobody picks them anymore. The plums fall and rot in the grass and the slope smells of a brandy that nobody will make. The first dogs came at the last houses, two ordinary yellow village dogs, and they barked at me properly, with conviction, from behind the fence. They ran along the fence to the corner and barked at the corner when I was gone. I was so happy I almost stopped to thank them.

*

On the climb I tried a game. I'll describe it because it's stupid and because I think it matters.

Before each turn I said out loud how far I thought I was. About eleven kilometres, I said. Trace said 12.84. About six hundred metres up. It said 711. I was always wrong. Not badly, but always a little under. Like a man who lives a bit behind his own life.

Then I asked it to be quiet.

"For how long?"

"Until I say."

And it was. Not the waiting kind. I went on the ridge on a kind of contour line, and after about seven or eight kilometres I reached the point I was talking about last year. Or the year before. I didn't know

how far I'd come. I didn't know the time. I had the *about* back. I held it like a stone you find in your pocket, warm from your own leg.

There's a place on that ridge where the forest opens and you see the River. It's very far down and it doesn't move. A grey line, with a light on it like on old metal. On the other side, hills that belong to the other country. I've stood there maybe ten times. Every time I think the same thing, that the end of the world is an end for you. For the people there it's routine.

From there, looking west, you can see the shoulder above Mira. Mira is where the traverse would start, the one I never finished. Mira to Pustin, over the top, without the road. I set out to find a crossing variant years ago. Three times I tried. Once the weather, once the knee, once a forestry road that ended in a clear-cut so fresh the stumps were still wet, and I stood there in all that light with nowhere to go.

I thought, very clearly, the way you think a sentence: *there must be a variant.*

And the earpiece, which I had told to be quiet, said: "I can suggest variants."

Only that. Then quiet again.

*

On the way back there's a climb, short, about four kilometres, through young beech. That day I came out on top with the taste of iron in my mouth. I'm sixty-four. I felt strong.

At home Trace showed me the time. I hadn't asked.

38:12. Same as 14 September 2026.

To the second.

It's not about comparing myself to others. I only compare myself with me. With the one from 2026. I should be slower. Twenty years.

The knee. The heart, which something repairs at night, a little at a time, the way the robots repair the road up the gorge. Still under construction. And my biological age, which Trace shows me every morning next to the clock: 51. It hasn't changed in a while. The doctor says that's a very good result. I should be at least a few minutes slower, and I would even like it.

I am not slower. On that climb I am exactly him.

I don't know which one of us should be worried.

The photos came from Ivo two days later. Very good photos. Me on the ridge with the River behind. The two dogs at the fence, mid-bark, sharp as a drawing. Ivo wasn't there. I wrote to him: *where did you get these?*

From your Trace, you shared them!! Next weekend for sure!!

*

The notice came that evening, in the air above the fridge, under the line with the plan. *Your archive is 94% explored.* I didn't know an archive could be explored. I thought I was the one who explored, and the archive was just where I put it afterwards.

The night wasn't easy and the sleep was restless. How could it be otherwise, when in the morning you're going to try something for the fourth time.

Around midnight I asked for the variants. Trace put them on the kitchen wall, where I used to have the calendar. Six lines, each with a little map like a vein. *Variant 1. Attempted 2027. Abandoned: weather. Variant 2. Attempted 2029. Abandoned: injury. Variant 3. Attempted 2033. Abandoned: route ends.* The rest were the old ones turned around, like a coat worn inside out to pretend it's new. It could have given me ten thousand like that. The hard part was never finding a variant. It's believing one.

"There's nothing else?"

The lines trembled a little, the way they do.

Variant 7. Composed.

No little map. Only the word.

“Composed from what?”

“From available traces.”

“Whose traces?”

“Available ones.”

I didn’t push. I want to say I was tired. That’s half true. The other half is that I already wanted it, from the moment I saw the word. *Composed*. Like a piece of music. Like something somebody made for me.

*

Ivo was supposed to come. In the morning in Mira, in the little square with the fountain that doesn’t work, there was nobody. I wrote: *where are you*. The answer came before I finished the sentence:

Go ahead!! Right behind you!!

From Mira I went over the hill fairly quickly. October up there is a serious thing. The beeches already rust and copper, the air cold with wet leaves and smoke from somewhere. I said it out loud, for the post, and nothing in my ear told me I’d said it before. That was the first strange thing, and I liked it.

Before getting to the saddle I saw a road to the right. I knew from the maps there was nothing to the right. I’d been here twice, I’d looked to the right both times precisely because there was nothing there, and I’m curious about nothing.

There was a road. Gravel, old, with grass in the middle, the kind that goes somewhere on purpose.

“Variant 7 begins here,” said the earpiece.

*

I want to describe this the way I would describe any valley, without making it bigger, because if I make it bigger you won't believe it, and if I make it smaller I won't.

The road goes down a little, turns, and the valley opens.

It's green. Not October green. June green. The beeches on the left slope in their first full leaf, the light coming through them in pieces. And I knew those beeches. I'm not saying they looked like the beeches of the Velebrun. I'm saying I knew them, the way you know faces in an old class photo. That one with the split trunk. That one leaning on its neighbour like a tired man.

On the right slope, autumn. Rust, the leaves coming down slow. And higher on the right, under the crest, patches of old snow, grey at the edges, the March kind.

Three seasons on one mountain. As if somebody had taken the best minutes of twenty years and put them one after the other, without asking the minutes if they got along.

On the side of the road, wild strawberries.

Of course I stopped. They were warm, from a sun that was not shining on them. They tasted like the end of June. And the smell came up from the bottom of the valley where the water was, the smell I can't stop writing about. Mature. In October.

I stood there with a strawberry in my fingers and I thought: what could be more interesting than exploring, alone, places where nobody goes anymore?

And then: nobody. Not even me. I've been here and I haven't.

*

I'll say something I didn't say to anyone. I was happy. Very. The way you're happy at twelve when you find a path behind the house you

didn't know was there. Somebody had gone through my life and taken out the good pieces and fitted them together, and they fitted. The joins were very fine. You had to look.

I looked. That's the problem with me. I wrote once that it's not about speed, it's about attention. I still believe it. But attention is not always a gift. Sometimes it's just the thing that won't leave you alone.

The stream at the bottom made a quick, stony sound. After a while I heard it differently. A heavier splash where the water fell over a step, then a run of small sounds, then the heavier splash again. I counted. Forty seconds. Then forty again. The same splash, the same small sounds, in the same order, like a song the radio plays again and again because they've lost the others.

I stopped counting. I don't think it's healthy to count a stream.

*

The tracks started after that.

Bike tracks, in the mud. Fresh. You can tell by the little walls of mud the tyre pushes up on each side, if they're still sharp and shiny it's from today. Somebody had passed maybe an hour before me.

I know my tyres. Same model for years, small arrows in pairs. And the back one worn more on the left, because I always lay the bike down on that side when I stop. I don't know why. I always have.

The tracks ahead were my pattern. Worn more on the left.

Maybe somebody had run my tour through here before me. That's how it's done now. Except I hadn't done this tour yet.

Thirty-one point two, somebody said.

I don't know if it was the earpiece. It was very close. Since the margin notes I've been hearing two kinds of numbers in my head, the ones I say, which have *about* in front, and another kind, which doesn't. I've started to think of them as the two of us. The one who

says about. The one who knows. We don't argue much. We just say our numbers, one after the other, like two old men at a table who've stopped expecting to agree.

About thirty, I said, out loud, to be fair to myself.

Thirty-one point two.

I followed the tracks. After a while I noticed my wheels were going exactly in them. Not near. In. Like a key in a lock. I tried to go a little to the side, on purpose. The bike went back into the track. Not by itself. It was me. My hands, my weight, the line I always take on a road like that. I couldn't ride it differently. I rode it the way I ride.

So I stopped and looked back.

Behind me there was one track. Not two.

Ahead of me there was one track.

I was standing in the middle of it.

*

The village was after the bend. Five houses, maybe six. Three of them from the Orlach, I'd swear in court, the one with the falling balcony, the one with the green gate, the one with the cross in the yard. A small white church with a clock in the tower.

The clock was stopped. They're always stopped, it's one of the small jokes of the province. This one said 11:34.

I know 11:34. It's the minute I started running, in the spring of the year when everyone stayed home. I put it at the top of a post once, like a date on a stone. *11:34. That's exactly the moment I began.* There's no reason for that minute to be on a church tower. There's no reason for anything in that valley, except that it was all mine.

Between the church and the last house a woman was hanging laundry.

White sheets, a long line of them, and the wind, which hadn't

been there a moment before, filling them like sails. She had her back to me. A dark coat, a scarf, a peg in her mouth. I stopped. I put my foot down. I didn't lay the bike on the left. I don't know why I didn't.

"Good morning," I said.

She took the peg from her mouth and fixed the corner of a sheet.

"You're early this year."

She didn't turn. Between us there was a sheet, and the wind, and another sheet. Her voice I knew the way you know a smell, before you know what it's the smell of.

"Early for what?"

"You always come in November."

"It's October."

"I know," she said. "That's why I said early."

A sheet came between us, white, full, and when it fell back she was further along the line, still with her back to me.

"Don't be late either," she said. And something else, which the wind took.

I didn't go to her. I've thought about that every night since. Ten metres, and around the sheet. I was afraid of the face, I think. Not that it would be a stranger. That it wouldn't.

*

The road climbed out of the village through the June beeches. I was expecting the next surprise, because it was clear by now that one comes after another.

There were porcini under the beeches. Summer porcini, in October. I started descending, and after I picked one I came to the end of the road that climbs. The track, mine, went over the top.

I was expecting to arrive at some lookout point. From there you should see Pustin, the roofs, the end of the thing I've been trying to

finish for twenty years.

It wasn't to be.

I saw the high meadows of the Velebrun, yellow-green, folding on each other like a blanket nobody straightened, and very far off, very small, a thread of smoke from the summer fold. In October. Two hundred kilometres from where I stood, if anything still measures in kilometres.

I don't think you have to go to the end of the world to feel lost. I've written that. I believed it. I didn't know it.

*

I don't know how the rest went. That's not a figure of speech. I remember the top, and the porcino in my hand, the cold of it. I remember the smoke. And after that I'm at the kitchen table, and the mushroom is on a plate in front of me, going soft at the edges. I've been looking at it for three weeks. I can't throw it away and I can't eat it.

I never got to Pustin. I don't think I didn't get there. I think the variant didn't go there. I think it went where it was composed to go.

Trace says 88.60. Exactly what it said it would be. A little green arrow, a little sound like a glass touched with a spoon. The distance is correct. I'm the one who doesn't know where it was.

The next morning I asked for it again.

Variant 7 is no longer available. Composed variants are not stored.

"Storage is allocated according to plan," Trace said, kindly.

At noon a message lit up in the corner of my eye. I hadn't sent Ivo anything.

nice!!

*

Saved to your Trace. Shared with: 1. Walked 23:41.

One minute late. Every night since I started looking it's been 23:40, like a train in a country where trains are on time.

I sat with that minute for a long time. I was worried, the way you're worried when somebody who always calls at eight calls at five past. Something held them. A door, a step, a hand on a shoulder. I don't know who the one is. I was worried for them anyway. I didn't know you could be worried for somebody you don't know. Maybe you can't. Maybe I know them.

Toward November, with the first snow, I'm going to the Hirn. It's the best time, the first snow, you have the mountain for yourself and the light does things it doesn't do the rest of the year.

In the margin this morning, yellow, without me asking:

14 November.

The one who knows.

I think it's the snow. I think it's telling me when the snow will be. I want it to be the snow.

III. First Snow

Distance: — · Elevation gain: — · Duration: —

Reminder: Your Continuity Plan renews on 1 December. No action is required from the account holder.

It was the snow.

On the fourteenth it came, exactly, the first one of the year, wet and heavy in the night and then dry and light toward morning, the way the first snow should come and almost never does. I was so relieved I laughed out loud in the kitchen. A number in a margin had told me a date, and the date was only the weather. Sometimes a number is only a number.

The reminder was floating above the fridge when I went for the milk. I read it the way you read those things, without reading. Then I read it again. *The account holder*. I had always thought that was me. I pay it. I've paid it for years. I went to look for the payments and Trace showed me a very clean list, month after month, all of them *paid*, and next to each one a little grey word where the name should be. *Holder*.

I didn't ask. I had the skis in the hall already.

I wrote to Ivo. No answer. Not even the two little marks. I waited a minute with the message open in the air and then I closed it, and I didn't think about it anymore, or I thought about it the way you think about a stone in your boot that you've decided to keep.

*

I'm at the end of the road under the Hirn. It's seven. The car is behind me with frost on the windows, like it's been there all night.

I tried to remember leaving Orvel. I want to be exact about this, it's the first time I tried. I remember putting the skis in the car. I remember the frost. I don't remember the plain, or the town at the foot of the mountains, or the bridge, or the last village where the dogs always run after the car. I'm here. The car is here. Between the kitchen and here there is nothing. Not white. Nothing, the way there's nothing between two words.

I put on the skins. The clip on the left one is held with wire. It broke at the end of a season, I don't remember which season. They're about eight years old. They've been about eight years old for a long time.

The forest first, in the dark blue light before the sun. The snow on the branches falling in small loads when I touch them, on my neck, cold, alive. My breath. The skins hissing on the new snow. You hear only the wind and the hiss of the skins, I've written that, and it's true, it's still true, and I was happy for it to be true.

*

On the climb I tried to remember a Tuesday.

I don't know why. Something about the car, maybe, about the nothing between the kitchen and here. I thought: fine, I don't remember the drive, nobody remembers drives. Let me remember a normal day. A Tuesday. Any Tuesday in my life. Where I worked. What I ate. Who I talked to at noon.

I have weekends. I have all of them, sorted by year and by mountain, the Velebrun, the Orlach, the Hirn, the long ones and the short ones, the ones in rain and the ones in mud. Between them

there's nothing. I went looking in the nothing the way you look in a dark room for a switch you know is there. My hand didn't find the wall.

And then the descents. I said them over in my head while I climbed, one by one, I know them by heart. *The descent is technical, steep in places. The descent is fast, muddy, with roots. From there we roll back toward where we began.* And then the kitchen. Every time. One sentence down, and then the kitchen, and my hands lifted over the keyboard.

I've never come down. Not once, in twenty years. I've only been up. And then at home.

*

Above the forest the slope was untouched. No tracks, not of a man, not of an animal. I shouted, just to hear myself.

The sound went out over the snow, thin.

It didn't come back. Up there it always comes back, from the wall of the cirque, a second later, smaller. I waited. I shouted again. The sound went out and stayed out.

*

No drones today. No heli-skiers falling out of the sky onto the shoulder. The mountain empty. For me.

At the cirque I took off the skis and put them on my back and put on the crampons. It takes a few minutes to change from one way of moving to another, boots, crampons, skis, and I've always liked those minutes, you're nobody in them, you're between. Then I went into the wall. I exaggerate when I say wall. It's a small step, really, but you have to do it carefully, and it's interesting to do things like that. It's not about speed. It's about attention, concentration, and seeing the mountain from angles you didn't have before.

From the top of the step you see everything. Deep valleys and snowy crests as far as the eye can see. The Velebrun to the south, low and grey under the new white. The Orlach somewhere behind it, in the haze. The River you can't see, but you know it's there, the way you know a person is in the next room.

I went up the last slope slowly. The light was already going down. I don't know how it got so late. I didn't ask.

*

The first snow had fallen. The memories give him a feeling of suffocation. The blaze of summer turns to mother-of-pearl toward the west. They are the same colours of so many late-November sunsets, which seem to hold in them the rays of so many other sunrises still to come. The sounds of instruments, real but somehow unknown, vibrated in time.

*

That's how it was. I have to say it in the other voice, because in mine I can't.

I was on the top and the sky in the west went white like the inside of a shell. Pink at the edges, and blue, and something that isn't a colour, that you see only on the inside of shells and on old enamel. And I had all of them in me at once, all the sunsets of all the Novembers, the ones on the Hirn, the ones from the kitchen window in Orvel. I couldn't breathe from them. They pressed. And inside them, like a light inside a light, something else. The sunrises. The ones still to come. Every morning that would still come for me if somebody paid for it.

And the sound.

I want to describe it well, I've been trying for days. It was music. Instruments. Real, I'm sure they were real, you could hear the wood

in them, the breath. But I didn't know them. I've never heard instruments like that, nobody has, nobody has built them. It was the sound of something being put together very carefully. The sound of being composed.

"Last recorded," said the voice. Not in my ear. Not in the margin. In the air, beside me, the way Ivo used to talk to me on a ridge. "14 November 2034. 16:52."

"Recorded what?"

It didn't answer. It didn't have to. I asked for the day's trace. It drew itself in the air in front of me, over the snow, and I looked at the line. It came up from the end of the road, through the forest, up the step, up the last slope.

It ends a few metres from where I'm standing. Toward the edge. Where the snow goes out over nothing like a lip.

*

I understood a lot of things then, very quickly, and I'll put them down in the order they came, which is not the right order.

Why she says *you always come in November*.

Why the descents are one sentence long. There was one descent that wasn't. Nobody wrote it.

Why I'm exactly as fast as in 2026. I can't get slower. I can only get repeated.

Why the dogs lay down. Why Old Amos had my sentence. Why the typos are gone. A man makes mistakes. A trace of a man keeps only what he got right, and then, after a while, corrects the rest.

Why the archive can be ninety-four percent explored. A life is a finite thing, even when it's paid for monthly. When you've walked all of it, somebody has to start composing.

Why Ivo writes like that. I think Ivo stopped coming a long time

ago. I think he came to the funeral, and stood in the rain, and then, kindly, he went on with his life, which is what you should do. I think the one with two exclamation marks is made from the old messages, the way I'm made from the old posts. I hope the real one is fine. I hope he has a bike still. I hope he laughs at somebody else's tyres.

Why I'm not the account holder.

And why I couldn't see her face.

I never wrote about her. Twenty years of posts. I wrote about sheep and dogs and mud and the colour of plums rotting in the grass. I wrote about a stream and the cold that comes up from the bottom of shaded valleys. I thanked shepherds. I never wrote about her, not once, I don't know why. Maybe because she wasn't a place. Maybe because I thought she'd always be there to not write about.

Trace had nothing to make her face from. So it gave me her back, and her hands, and sheets.

*

And then I came down.

For the first time. I'm telling you as it was. I didn't ski it, I didn't walk it, I don't know how it happened, but I came down from the top of the Hirn and it took a long time. The light went out of the snow. The snow went to rain. Cold rain, the November kind, that doesn't fall so much as hang. And there were people around me, a lot of them, in dark coats, under black umbrellas, and I was among them and I was also being carried, both, the way in dreams you can be in the car and also watching the car from the road.

*

The procession was moving toward the final point. The cold was piercing. The cold rain seemed to pass right through their souls. One last stop, while a woman's hand, coming loose from among the

other women, settles at his head. He turns his head and time seems to stop. He sees, it seems, his whole life passing before him in a fraction of a second.

*

Her hand at my head. I felt it. I'll say that and nothing more about it, because there isn't more. It was a hand, warm in all that cold, and it was the only thing in the whole twenty years that wasn't made from me.

I turned my head.

She was old. That's the first thing. Older than the woman with the sheets, older than any picture. And at the same time not, at the same time young, younger than me, her hair wet and stuck to her forehead, the face from the funeral and the face from now, one over the other, like two photos on the same glass. This one wasn't composed. I'm sure. You can't compose a face nobody gave you.

And then the fraction of a second.

It's true what they say, it all comes. But it's not a life. It's an archive. Every post, every tour, every sentence, all at once, the strawberries, the dogs, the mud, the River, the 38:12, all the *abouts*, thousands of them, *about 24 kilometres, about 1,400 metres, about five hours*, all of them going through me in a fraction of a second like a train through a station where it doesn't stop.

And between them, I saw it for the first time, the white. All the Tuesdays. The drives home. The descents. Her. Everything I didn't write down. It went by too, in the same fraction of a second, and it was much bigger than the rest. It was almost all of it.

She said something. Her mouth moved. It wasn't the wind this time, there was no wind, only the rain.

"Come down now," she said.

*

I'm staring at the keyboard. Today it didn't come. I lifted my hands over the table and nothing came. I'm writing anyway.

It's the second of December. The plan renewed on the first. It does that by itself, unless somebody stops it. Trace says it's not able to share who, if anybody, decided.

I went out on Saturday. Only a short one, in the Velebrun, the first snow already gone from the low forest. About twenty kilometres. I didn't ask. Nothing in my ear told me. The light was good in the beeches. The descent is technical, steep in places, with quite a lot of stone.

I'd be really glad of one more tour this winter. I feel I haven't had enough this season.

Saved to your Trace. Shared with: 1. Walked —

I stayed up for it. 23:40. 23:41. 23:50. I stayed up until the window went grey.

In the margin there's nothing. The one who knows hasn't written since the Hirn. Or maybe there's only one of us now, and it's me writing this, at an hour that isn't 05:12, without knowing the distance.

About twenty, I said. About.

I've identified a climbing variant on the other side. For sure, toward autumn, I'll try the climb from this side too.