

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/1

Andrew Stancek

### On the Bench

Father is snoring after lunch. Mirko brought him soup, "Too salty." Sliced him a dozen pieces of kolbasa, arranged them on a plate with blue cheese and pickles, "They didn't have the spicy one?" Closed the blinds, "That damn sun is right in my eyes".

The radio announcer's gravelly voice says three homeless are dead due to exposure but Mirko cannot stay inside. He considers leaving a note, decides he'll get a tongue-lashing regardless, puts on an angora sweater, winds a purple scarf around his neck, wiggles into the anorak. As the door clicks behind him he feels lighter, breathing for the first time in weeks.

The streets are deserted. The old linden in the parkette has a huge branch down, snapped off by the frost. Mirko's cheeks are stinging but he still wants to unzip, feeling the heat of freedom. He'll run down to the Danube, he decides, watch the waves.

He'll get a job, he will. Move out. Someone else can look after Father, or the old coot can look after himself. His cast will come off soon and then he can hobble to the corner restaurant, sit in the corner, drink and grumble.

Mirko enjoyed working in the restaurant, was learning knife techniques, shortcuts of the sous-chefs. Even if his old boss won't have him back, Mirko can use him as a reference. Restaurants always need workers willing to scrub, scramble, pitch in wherever needed. Ice pellets are hitting Mirko in the face yet he's grinning. Hope, there's hope. He's not done yet. He looks up the long Danube promenade, deserted, wind whipping twirling clouds of snow. He sees a shape on one of the benches. *Not someone frozen to death, please.* He shuffles towards the puffs steaming out of the huddled, hooded form. "You need help?" he shouts, thinking the man is probably too crazy or too drunk to register. A hand wiggles out of the blankets, moves aside the scarf.

"Mirko?" she says.

Zofka. Last time Mirko saw her he was fighting for her honor at the restaurant, then was fired. Her face is chapped and her eyes sunken but she's still the stunning woman of Mirko's dreams. He lowers himself on the bench, brushes snow off. She puts a shaking arm out and Mirko holds her hand. They'll be together, he knows. It's fate.