

# The Gate

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On Friday a boy from Innsbruck fell from two hundred and sixty metres, and fifty thousand people cheered when he waved.

I watched it from the tower. Florian Mair, twenty years old, took off a hair late from gate fourteen, and somewhere over the knoll a gust from the Tamar valley got under his left ski and turned him like a page. He came down on his shoulder and slid the rest of the landing slope in a spray of salt and snow. Then he sat up and lifted his good arm, and the noise came up the hill at me like weather.

The big screen cut to his parents in the stand. The broadcasters call it the fear cam. The jumpers no longer have faces worth filming at the moment of a fall, so the director finds the mother instead. This one had both hands over her mouth. The crowd cheered that too.

I wrote the time in my notebook. 11:42. Gust from the left, third flag. My handwriting was very neat. Then I lowered the gate two notches for the next jumper, and the man from the broadcaster came up the tower stairs to tell me I was killing the show.

“Two notches,” he said. “Marjan. We are thirty metres short of the record and you are giving them a children’s hill.”

“The wind is from Tamar,” I said.

“The wind is always from Tamar.”

“Then I will always lower the gate.”

He went back down. Below us the medics were walking Florian to the ambulance and he was still waving. His collarbone, it turned out, was in three pieces. He told the cameras he had felt nothing until the snow, which was the honest truth, and which is the whole problem.

I should explain the quieting, because people outside the sport think it is a drug, and it is not. It is a week in a clinic. You lie in a scanner and they ask you to remember, slowly and in order, every time in your life you have been afraid of falling. While you remember, they give you something that stops the memory from being written back. A memory, it turns out, is not a thing you keep in a drawer. It is a thing you make again each time you take it out. After a week there is nothing left to make. You can stand at the edge of a roof and feel what you would feel standing on a kitchen chair.

The federation fought it for four years and then wrote it into the rules. Rule 4.11: athletes in ski-flying events must hold a valid extinction certificate. The reason was not distance, whatever the newspapers said. The reason was insurance. On a flying hill the most dangerous thing a person can do is hesitate. A frightened jumper sits back by a hundredth of a second at the lip of the table, the air gets under the tips, and that is how bones break. Quieted jumpers do not hesitate. The crash rate fell by more than half in the first season. It is a good rule. I voted for it.

What nobody said out loud at the congress was that the ones who still fall now fall differently. A frightened jumper who feels it going wrong bails out early. He folds, lands short and ugly, and gets up swearing. A quieted jumper rides it all the way to the end, because there is nothing left in him that says enough. Fewer falls. Longer falls.

So they wrote a second rule, and that one is about me. Rule 7.3: the race director at a ski-flying event shall not hold an extinction certificate. Somebody on the mountain has to be afraid on their behalf, and the gate is that person's hand.

I have run the gate at Planica for twenty-two winters. Before that I jumped here, without distinction, in the nineties, when the hill was smaller and so were we. I know this hill the way you know the stairs in your own house in the dark. I know that when the third flag above the K-point lifts and drops in the same breath, it is not wind, it is the valley breathing out, and you wait for the next breath. I know that the snowcat drivers eat at the bakery in Kranjska Gora that opens at three, and if they come up the road late, the landing has not been salted. I know which boys go quiet in the hut afterwards. I knew, anyway, back when any of them did.

The hill is bigger now. They lengthened it again four summers ago, and the record has crept up every March since: 287, then 289, then 291 and a half. This season the sponsors had painted a red line across the snow at three hundred metres, with a logo on it, and the whole valley was waiting for someone to land beyond it. The leader after Friday was Eirik Bakken of Norway, who had flown 289 in training and did not understand why anyone would want him to fly less.

Third, two points behind him, was Zala Rozman, from Kranj, nineteen years old, the first Slovenian woman to fly past two hundred and fifty here. When she came down the outrun on Thursday the stand had sung her name for three minutes. She stood in the finish area and did not wave. People said that was modesty.

She came to my house on Saturday night.

I live in Rateče, the last village before Italy, a twenty-minute walk from the hill. It was half past ten and snowing again when she knocked. She had her team jacket on with the hood up, and she stood in the doorway long enough for the snow to settle on her shoulders before I understood that she wanted to come in.

I put the kettle on the stove. She sat at my kitchen table and looked at the clock on the wall, which was my mother's and runs four minutes fast, and at the photographs, which are mostly of hills.

“You lowered after Florian,” she said.

“Yes.”

“You lowered before, too. Thursday, second round. Bakken was furious. You saw the third flag.”

I set a cup of mountain tea in front of her. “You were watching the flags?”

“I always watch the flags.” She turned the cup by its handle, a quarter turn, then back. “Nobody else does any more. Why would they? If you are not afraid, the flags are just decoration.”

The stove ticked. Outside, a snowplough went past and lit the curtains orange.

“I have to tell you something,” she said, “and then you will probably have to report it. Rule something.”

“Tell me first.”

“I don’t have one.” She said it to the tea. “I mean, I have the paper. It is a real paper. I just never had it done.”

She told me how. A clinic in Ljubljana, a week in the scanner like everyone else, and a nurse who was her cousin’s friend and who, for six days, hung a bag of salt water where the other bag should have been. “I lay there and remembered everything,” Zala said. “Every fall. The time I was eleven on the small hill at Gorenja Sava and went into the fence. Every time I stood on a bar and wanted to go home. Very carefully, in order, like they ask. And nothing took it away.” She laughed once, not happily. “It was the worst week of my life. I think I came out more afraid than I went in.”

“Why?”

She looked at me as if it was a stupid question, and maybe it was. “Because that is how I fly. When I am afraid I can feel the air. All of it, on my hands, on my face, under the skis. It is like the fear is the part

of me that pays attention. If they take it, I will still jump. I just will not be there.”

“Your coach knows?”

“Rok? Rok is quieted. Rok thinks fear is a kind of bad posture.” She pushed the cup away an inch. “Nobody knows. My cousin’s friend. Now you.”

“Why me?”

“Because tomorrow they will all want three hundred. Rok, the sponsors, the television, Bakken. And if the wind is wrong I will go from whatever gate you give me. I am not going to be the one who asks to go lower. A coach can request a lower gate for his jumper, you know that, it is in the book. Do you know how many times anyone has asked for it this season? Never. If I ask, they will test me within a week.” She took a breath. “And you are the only person up there who is allowed to be afraid. Rule 7.3. I read the whole book. So I thought, there is one other person on that mountain. I will tell him. Then I am not the only one.”

I should say what I thought then, because it was not kind. I thought: by every number the federation has, this girl is the most dangerous person on the hill. A frightened jumper on a flying hill. She had flown two seasons unquieted and never once fallen, and that was luck, the numbers said, and luck runs out. I thought of the forms. I thought of Florian sliding on his shoulder with his arm up. I thought that I was sixty-three years old and had a rule book in the drawer behind her chair and a duty that was written in it.

“Go home,” I said. “Sleep. Do not go to the bakery at three, the snowcat men will know your face.”

She stood. At the door she pulled her hood up and then stopped, with her hand on the latch.

“Is it bad?” she said. “Being afraid every day, for other people?”

“You get used to it,” I said.

She nodded as though that was what she had come to hear, and went out into the snow.

That was a lie, and it was not the first one I had told in that kitchen.

Two winters ago, in the second round of the team event, a boy called Luka Prezelj took off from a gate I had chosen and did not land on his feet. He teaches mathematics in Jesenice now, from a chair, and he sends me a card every Christmas, which is worse than if he did not. I had looked at the flags that day. I had felt the wind wrong in my stomach and I had told myself it was only nerves, only an old man, and I had left the gate where the television wanted it.

After that I could not climb the tower stairs. I would get to the twelfth step and my hands would go, and I would stand there holding the rail while the young officials went past me pretending not to see. I could not sleep. In the night I set gates in my head, over and over, and every one of them was too high. My doctor in Jesenice said there was a clinic in Graz that did not ask what you did for a living.

So there it is. I went in May, when the hill was green and nobody was looking. I paid for it myself. And the week before I went, I sat at the kitchen table where Zala had just been sitting and wrote down everything I was afraid of. Forty years of it. Not as feelings, as instructions. When the third flag lifts and drops in the same breath, wait. When the snowcats are late, ask about the salt. When a boy looks at the bar instead of the table, lower one. When the television wants it, lower one anyway. I filled a whole notebook in pencil, in my own hand, for the man who would come home from Graz on the following Monday and not feel any of it. On the first page I wrote: You will not feel it. Do what it says anyway.

For nineteen months I have run the gate at Planica out of that notebook. I act my fear the way a good actor cries, from memory and correctly. I lower when the old man tells me to. My hands are very steady on the tower stairs now. Everyone says I look well.

And so there were two of us on that mountain breaking the same rule from opposite ends, and she had come to me because she thought I was the honest one.

I sat at the table a long time after she left. I could have told her. I could have run after her down the road in my slippers and said: there is no one else, Zala, I am sorry, it is only you. But I thought about her face when I said you get used to it, and I thought that if she needed one other frightened person on the hill, I could at least be one from the outside. It is not so different, I told myself, from what I had been doing all along. Nobody can see inside the tower.

Sunday was bright and wrong. The sun came over the Ponce ridge at nine and the snow on the landing went from blue to white, and by the time the final round started there was a wind in the valley that could not decide where it lived. The flags along the slope lifted together, dropped, then lifted one at a time from the bottom up, like a crowd doing the wave.

Päivi Lehto, the technical delegate, stood beside me in the tower with her coffee. She is Finnish and quieted and very good at her job, and she looks at wind numbers the way other people look at train times.

“Gate twelve is fine by the numbers,” she said.

“The numbers are an average.”

“So is everything.” She shrugged. “Your gate, Marjan. Your rule.”

The man from the broadcaster was in my earpiece. They had a guest in the studio, a former champion, saying the conditions were perfect for history. Down at the bottom the sponsor’s red line lay across the snow like a ribbon at a finish.

At ten past eleven Eirik Bakken came up the inrun stairs to the tower window, which jumpers are not supposed to do. He had a Hearth earbud in, the little amber light blinking, and he spoke to me in Norwegian through the glass. The federation gives every official a Hearth too, and

the one in my other ear gave me his words in Slovenian half a second later, in a voice much more polite than his face.

“You are stealing our metres. You are afraid for people who are not afraid. That is your problem. It is not ours.”

“Yes,” I said. “That is my job.”

The earbud must have done something gentle with it, because he only shook his head and went back down to the bar.

I held the gate at twelve for the first part of the round and watched the flags and read the notebook. The old man in the notebook had a good deal to say about wind from Tamar. I followed it. Nobody fell. A Pole flew 268, a Japanese boy 271. The crowd was restless. Every jump that landed short of the red line drew a long sound out of the stand, not a boo exactly, more like fifty thousand people letting out a breath they had been told to hold.

Then it was Zala’s turn.

There is a camera on the start bar, for the television. It shows the jumper sitting on the bar with skis in the tracks, the last second before they push off. For two years I have watched faces on that screen and they have all looked the same: calm, a little bored, a person waiting for a bus that is on time. The director rarely uses those shots any more. There is nothing in them. He cuts to the mothers.

Zala’s face was calm too. She had been doing it a long time. But the camera was framed wide enough to show her hands on the bar, and her right hand was shaking. Not much. A small tremor in the glove, the way a leaf moves on a still day. Her knuckles were pale where the glove pulled tight. Nobody in the stand could see it. The director was looking for her mother. Päivi was looking at the anemometer. I do not think there was another person in Planica looking at that girl’s hands.

I opened the notebook. The old man had nothing about this. He had written a hundred things about flags and salt and snowcats and boys who look at the bar, but he had never seen her. She was not in there.

The third flag lifted and dropped in the same breath.

“Gate eleven,” I said.

Päivi looked up. In my ear the man from the broadcaster said a word I will not write down. Below us the coaches turned towards the tower with their arms out, and the change came up on the big screen, and the stand made its long sound again, louder. A gate change in the middle of the round applies to everyone who jumps after. I had just taken metres from Bakken and from the two Austrians behind him, and I had done it for a reason I could not have written on any form.

On the screen Zala’s hand stopped shaking. She lowered her head. Then she pushed off.

I have watched maybe forty thousand flights from that tower. I will tell you what hers looked like, and you may believe it or not. The quieted ones fly like stones that have been thrown well. She flew like somebody listening. You could see it in the small movements of her hands at her sides, little corrections a quieted jumper never makes because he does not notice the need. Halfway down the hill the valley breathed out and the air under her dropped, and she felt it before it happened and leaned into it like leaning into a door, and the hill carried her on. She landed at 249 metres in a telemark so clean that the judges, all five of them, gave her nineteen and a half.

The stand forgot about the red line for a moment. They sang her name. The fear cam found her mother, who was crying, and for once the camera had the wrong name.

Bakken jumped last, from my lower gate, and flew 283 and won the competition by a long way, and in the finish area he lifted his skis to the stand and then turned and looked up at the tower for a long moment. No one broke the record that year. The sponsors rolled up their red line

in the afternoon and took it back to wherever such things are kept. The man from the broadcaster did not speak to me at the party, and Päivi wrote in her report that the gate decisions of the race director had been “conservative but defensible”, which, from a Finn, is very nearly a hug.

Zala was third. She found me at the foot of the tower while the officials were packing up the cables. She still had her bib on, number forty-eight, and the snow on her boots had melted to two dark rings on the concrete.

“There was no flag,” she said.

“There was a flag.”

“There was. But that is not why.” She looked at me for a while, and I made myself look back. “Thank you,” she said, “for being afraid for me.”

“It is in the rules,” I said.

She laughed, a real one this time, and went off to the podium to stand on the lowest step and not wave.

That night I sat at the kitchen table with my mother’s clock running four minutes fast, and I opened the notebook to the first blank page and sharpened a pencil.

It was the first new line in nineteen months, and the first one in that book that was not mine. I wrote: Rozman, Zala. Right hand on the bar. When it shakes, lower one.

I do not know what to call that. The old man who wrote the rest of the notebook was afraid for real; I only obey him. This was something else. A fear I could not feel, belonging to someone who had not given it to me, written down by a man who no longer has any of his own, so that tomorrow I would know what I had seen today. I suppose it is a kind of theft. I suppose it is also the only honest thing I have done on that hill since the clinic in Graz.

In June she rang me. They were painting the judges' tower and she had volunteered, which nobody does. She wanted to ask me something she said she could not ask anyone else, since I was the only other one.

"What does it look like?" she said. "From the outside. From up there."

I was standing in my garden in Rateče with the phone at my ear, looking up at the hill, which in summer is only a long green scar on the mountain, with the tower small and white at the top of it. I thought about telling her then. I thought about it for so long she said my name to see if the line had dropped.

"It looks like someone holding very still on a cold bar," I said, "and then going anyway."

She was quiet. Then she said, "That is what courage is supposed to look like."

"I know," I said. "From the tower, I have never once been able to tell them apart."

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