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CHILDHOOD, MEMORY, AND THE COLD WAR

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Open Coffin¹

Irena Kašparová

She is excited. There is a funeral in the church of her father today, the corpse will be displayed in the open coffin as usual. She has prepared an exciting challenge for her friends, she wants to tease them, she wants to play a daring game, be a brave and hero girl in their eyes. They have two hours prior to the funeral. Under the oath of life not to tell anybody, she asks them to come in secret, should they want to see the dead body, should they want to touch the dead body, should they want to sniff the dead body. She has done it herself several times, more than she can remember. She knows the dead body is not dirty, nor cold, it smells of cologne and there are plenty of waxed flowers around it, so it is beautifully decorated in its Sunday clothes. She is not scared and she enjoys the feeling of power of that knowledge. Other children do not know what she knows, perhaps they have not seen the dead person before, they are afraid of the dead body, they are afraid of the church, they are afraid of the funeral. She feels powerful and at the same time wants to share her power with her friends. She does not want to be different any longer. They all come after school, sneaking in the church once the body is displayed. One by one they look at it, they touch it, they smell it. Their initiation is completed. For the rest of the afternoon they all play hide and seek in the church. The corpse is the base.

1 This is a childhood memory produced as part of the Reconnect/Recollect project discussed in the introduction to this book.