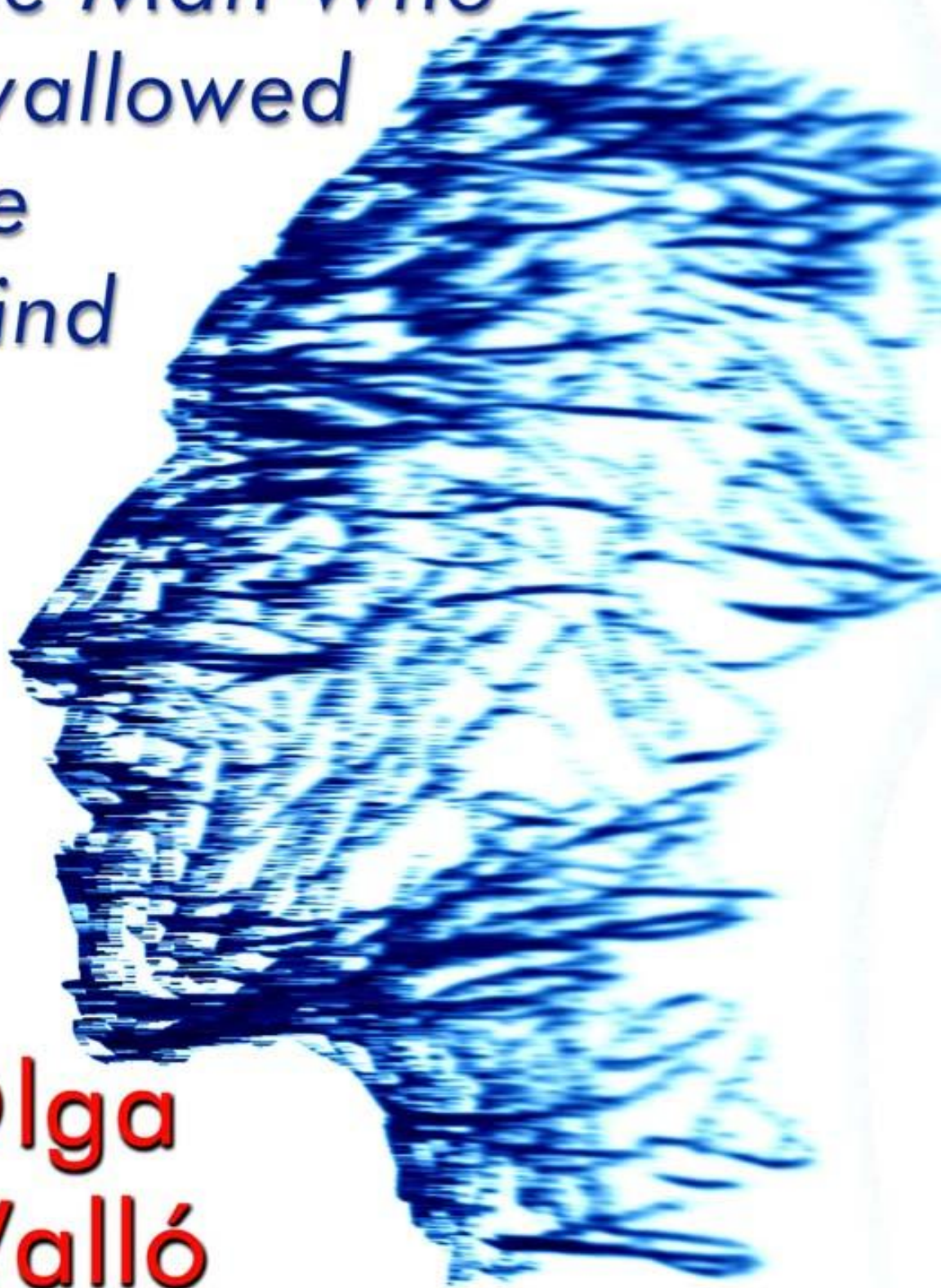


*The Man Who
Swallowed
the
Wind*

**Olga
Walló**



The Man Who Swallowed the Wind



Olga Walló

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This book was a wonderful opportunity for me to get an education in modern Czech history and the Czech language in an unconventional manner. It was a long journey, but one that I would repeat without a moment's hesitation.

I thank to Zuzana Stern for her translation of the verses in the book.

I particularly owe a huge debt of gratitude to Stázi Jakubcová, whose unremitting help and advice enabled me to reach the end of the book.

Stázi,

“I can no other answer make but thanks,
And thanks, and ever thanks...”
(Shakespeare, Twelfth Night)

James Khoury, translator

The reader will encounter footnotes in the text. The author points out that they may not be factual but they are significant.

FIRST ROUND

1. LONE SOLDIER STANDING IN THE FIELD

- I.
- II.
- III.
- IV.
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2. THE PATHS TO THE FATHER

- I.
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I.

II.

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I.

II.

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III.

SECOND ROUND

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I.

II.

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VI.

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I.

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EPILOGUE

FIRST ROUND

1. LONE SOLDIER STANDING IN THE FIELD

I.

A delightful and comforting scene; the Easter sun is extracting anemones from the grass and interlacing on the green sward in front of the Palace with white frontage are a snake of children. They are holding hands and singing in chorus:

Sol-fa-mi-re-mi-do-re-fa-mi-re-sol-sol
Sol-fa-mi-re-mi-do-re-fa-mi-re-do-do
Sol-fa-mi-re-mi-do-re-fa-mi-re-sol-sol
Sol-fa-mi-re-mi-do-re-fa-mi-re-do-do

Separately the small blue-eyed blonde boy intones cleanly, his distinctive voice ascending and descending with certainty and gusto. A big dark lad leads the line and laughs with undisguised pleasure.

*“Jól kibaszott velünk a szentkúti búcsú.
Ellopták a kocsink, ellopták a lovunk.
Nem maradt más nekünk, csak az apánk fasza.
Az kantárotuk fel, azzal mentiünk haza.”¹*

Helen Mařatková radiates, she is taking in only the melody. It is just how she imagined. Her reception could not have passed off any better. A true Easter holiday; folk songs, tradition...

Helen Mařatková doesn't know Hungarian, but is otherwise appropriately qualified. She has just assumed the role of director of the children's home. The title orphanage has for a long time not been used! Plus many of these children are not even orphans. Some have mothers... poor things. She, Helen, will be more than that to them: she will be their comrade. And in that word is everything. It is 1952. Soon she will be thirty and now she has her big opportunity. And these children with her!

“Realize, that you are lucky. Very, very lucky. This organization offers you the best, the absolute best, that could in the world be offered to you. Collective education. You can develop in a collective team. You now have a huge privilege, that you can grow up without... without...” Here Helen stammered a little. She had never been a big speaker. But she fostered on through her burning passion. “...prejudices. There's no one here to corrupt you. From you can emerge new people...”

The children's faces looked on at her dully. The jaw of the big lad, who had so distinctively sung – or perhaps rather shouted, dropped. His eyes bulged, bloodshot like an apathetic cocker-spaniel.

He must be mentally retarded... at least a little, Helen thought. She herself had a simple, and simply ugly face, as if made from potatoes.

She wanted to get it across to them that here they had an advantage ahead of everyone else and that they should therefore be proud of themselves. And also that they had grand role-models, who would enable them to... but for that, there would still be time. Gradually. Every day. They would understand. They were mouldable – they had to be. Perhaps they already understood it better than her new subordinates. Today there were here only two tutors, they alternate. Emma – the elder – was looking at her exceedingly peculiarly. The poor beanpole, she stood taller than Helen by a good half metre... while at the same time looking on her submissively from below. Andula – the younger, was thickset, zits bursting. She had a vile complexion and badly bleached hair.

“We'll start again. Together, children. We all together. You will address me as ‘Comrade’. ‘Comrade Director’ is correct, but you don't have to use this. Comrade is enough.”

She hadn't noticed the uncompromising drill sergeant undertones in her oration. She registered a flash of inherent repulsion and uncertainty.

“You still don't understand what an honour it is for you, but it doesn't matter... you will learn. I myself will teach you. To be a comrade is a huge honour. It is not garnered without merit... To your ‘aunts’ you can in the meantime say ‘Aunt’.” She concluded her speech almost defiantly.

The small blond boy who had sung so nicely knew better. He also did not understand Hungarian, but to him it was obvious that in that song there must be some trick. Otherwise Laco wouldn't have taught it so wildly. Whoever was too slow was a fucking useless little shit-stain. Laco pinched. He also knew how to take one hand under your neck and pull you

1

*We'll walk home, screw the market
One guy nicked our horse, another stole the carriage
We don't have but shit, and father's prick
if I tried to ride it, the tether wouldn't fit him.*

(Hungarian folk song)

up onto your tiptoes, till you turned blue and choked. It is a ridiculous feeling, Laco also wouldn't necessarily have to let go in time. Ivan himself had memorized these strange foreign words immediately... it was simple; it was much better to get on well with Laco.

When the organized free time in the garden finished they returned back up to the first floor. The tutors as usual were going last. He stopped on the stairway and waited for her

“Aunt Emma...”

“What is it, Ivan?” Emma, a tall and slim female, beamed at him. He was standing on a higher step, their face met at one level and she unashamedly radiated with tenderness.

“Would you prefer me to call you ‘Comrade Aunt’ or ‘Aunt Comrade?’” he asked in a serious and obliging voice.

“Don’t fool around, Ivan!” she said sternly. The boy could smell the aroma of her armpits. Aunt Emma always wore grey or brown jumpers, so that dirt could not be seen. Princesses are not to be sniffed at, let alone nuns. Nobody had ever cared for her enough to inform her of this... one of the many small tragic stories.

Emma had plenty of motherly instincts, though the last beats of her biological clock were painfully fading away. She was a simple person and to her bad luck she had never had a trace of a sense of humour, so even she had failed to appreciate what the new director was stressing in her speech: that in the current historical epoch, to be a cast-off off shoot of the lumpenproletariat, or at least an anonymous orphan without a family, was the absolute best – a real scoop, a unique chance to him dodge his past, not to succumb temptations, to create himself together with his buddies, to become a real, valid human being...

To be an orphan, it was evident, was perhaps occasionally good. But on the other hand, care for orphans was an unrewarding thing, this Emma knew for a fact. And this the comrade director would also come to know, if she still didn’t know it. Whoever decided with an honest heart to dedicate themselves to this profession, would soon get shaken up. Deprived descendents of antisocial can be lovely little bastards!

Of course, not Ivan. He was obedient and neat and tidy and also went to a normal primary school, not to a special needs one like most of these hopeless urchins.

Ivan was called that because he was born in June, on the day of his patron saint. He would not have himself have known about this patron saint, but Aunt Emma had told him about it when he had there for the first time celebrated his birthday. They had transferred him there at the start of the year, in which school was obligatory. When Emma saw him, something in her immediately clasped. He ‘fell into her eye’ as they say, but this was something more: as though he had gone through her eye and fell as far as under her collarbone and all the way to her breast.

“Happy birthday, Ivan!” was boomed out badly by the choir of children, because, in the tradition of establishments in the solid First Republic, it went so. And Ivan got on his plate an extra portion of pudding. But that was as special as it got, for in that home there were perhaps sixty children and so someone constantly had a birthday, sometimes also two or three all at once.

“But you will save, Ivan dear, you’ll see, when you grow up. It will do you good,” declared Aunt Emma. She had summoned him after dinner into her room and given him a genuine present, wrapped in a box with a bow.

“For your birthday you got... but you know... you have this for your name. You also have today your name day, you know? Saint Ivan... but now name days aren’t celebrated – so I thought...” and she gazed at him imploringly.

“Thank you very much, Aunt Emma.” He took the box and smiled at her. He was so well-mannered, but Emma was actually a little disappointed.

“So go and enjoy it in good health,” she said timidly.

He hesitated with the object in his hand. Everyone would see that he was carrying something – where to hide it? He didn’t know. He hadn’t been here very long. It was already his fourth children’s institute.

“Wait...” she stopped him. “You won’t even have a look at what I gave you?”

He understood and untied the bow. On one piece of cotton wool was lying a fountain pen with the brand name *Student*. In that year it would have cost 10 crowns and Aunt Emma earned 660 crowns a month. But that Ivan didn’t know. He honestly didn’t know what it was. The next step, however, he did know.

“Thank you very much, Aunt Emma,” he repeated quietly. He had blue-green eyes, but they didn’t even sparkle.

“You know what?” she said, because she knew. “Leave it here with me... until you go to school in Autumn. Then you can use it. In the meantime, you’ll know that you have it here with me.”

“Thank you very much, Aunt Emma,” he repeated for the third time and she pushed him out the door. She didn’t think anything. She rarely thought something explicitly. But it was a powerful feeling.

II.

She knew about him, only what was written in his personal file, which was extremely thin. Ivan Doseděl, male, birth weight, a couple of medical reports, a couple of documents about transfers, why did they have to move him around so much? The Infant's Institute – an institute for children aged from one to three years – this was logical, but then a Military hospital? Why? And then yet again in Prague? Before coming here? Regarding his mother, in the papers there was nothing.

He was probably named by the doctor who had delivered him on the day of Saint Ivan, Emma concluded, hmm, a discarded child. It was 1946 when he arrived into the world in Birth Sanatorium, Břevnov, such a respectable institution, no kidding!

His mum was certainly not called Mrs. Doseděl. In the swanky hospital there had either been an almighty fuck-up in the documentation or, lord knows, they were trying to cover up something. In her profession Emma was no stranger to such entries into the world.

In some senses he was the ideal child as could have been imagined to make a childless couple happy for a couple of years: a healthy lad, fully developed with all fingers and toes and without any sense of defect; the classic blue-eyed pure blooded Nordic Caucasian reminiscent of the plump satisfied baby from early Nestle ads.

And yet, he had not been adopted. It hadn't even been discussed. There had to be something in that... something...

It crossed Emma's mind that she was actually grateful for this *something*. She caught herself with this perception: She ran her hand across his face; skin touched skin. Her hands were jaded and the complexion under her glasses had already started to wither.

Of course she loved children; she wouldn't have otherwise taken such a job, right? But there were so many of them and they are what they are and it had been so many years... About this Emma was completely honest with herself. Most of the time it was difficult to love them – and be fair and to love all of them equally, it simply wasn't possible at all.

“It's simply an operation, and an operation requires discipline, discipline which induces mental stability, which in turn brings about a fair approach. We'll approach it in a roundabout way, this is a poor-quality population, but this can only be thought, not everything can be said aloud, Em, humanity is work,” said the old fat director. Before they fired him. Not fired, replaced. The cadres were superseded. And this new one in his place; no doubt it'll be quite a present.

Emma didn't even know, how it was with the old man. Had he apparently died? She had similarly never really understood him much. And of his death she actually wasn't particularly sorry. There was such an unacknowledged bitterness in her. The director was certainly a womanizer, when the opportunity presented itself, he was not averse to smacking someone's behind. However, at Emma, as a woman, he had never given a second glance.

Unfortunate love is much more prevalent in the world than its opposite. Ivan by and large noted that towards him Aunt Emma had a special relationship. When he had been ill and lying in the infirmary, she had brought him afternoon custard. And, on top of that, preserved pears, which Ivan loved. This does not necessarily imply that Ivan should reciprocate with the same intensity, it is not connate with him. Somewhere in himself he had huge stores of independence. Perhaps he had been born with it. Or maybe he discovered it when lying and staring infinitely at the matt white ceiling. He was never alone, save within himself. Soon he would learn to label that as well, for sure he knew that learning is easy. School was good. For his end-of-year assessments, he would again have straight 'A's right across the board. When he arrived for the first time with credits which the attending governess had to sign, Aunt Emma swept him off to the staffroom and placed him on a footstool in front of her.

Aunt Emma was a short-sighted beanpole. She alternated between glancing myopically into his pupil's book at then at him and then she started crying at kissed him. She mumbled to him a thank you and to keep up the good work and that he was her only pleasure in the world, then proceeded to blush while her nose started to run.

“Holy fuck, she practically wets 'erself over yer when she sees yer in the corridor, how d'yer do it, yer bastard? Your penis golden or what? Mate, if only I could borrow it...” sighed Laco Bacsí from above him, a tall gangly lad with a hare-lip.

Ivan' inexperienced ears heard this question put quite differently. Not golden admittedly, but he did have a pen. How did Laco know about it? Since his first year he had owned a fountain pen with the mark *Student*. He had got it from Aunt Emma as a present for his name-day, it was his and his only, and he was rightfully proud of it. But in eight years of his life he had already been in four institutions and he had learned consequently, that it was dangerous to get too attached to possessions.

“I'll lend it to you, Laco! Don't you worry! But only to you.”

Laco erupted in laughter, spluttering onto his tracksuit top.

III.

Whoever wants to survive, must know how. To create for oneself and defend one's own space. That's how it is. The world is, of course, so confined that this space does not necessarily need to be, external, where it would with a bang collide with the vociferous spaces of other people.

Ivan has gradually learned to turn his perspective within himself. It's difficult to guess what he is at that moment thinking – and if he is thinking something which can be articulated. Found there – occasionally with feelings not dissimilar to an adventurous shiver – is a gravely dense formation of dumpling dough-like substance. Like anyone else who has ever attempted to mould this substance into categorized formations², he naturally discovers that several of these categories were

² How one venerable professor of the Philosophy faculty at Charles University, Prague in a class on the

already firmly imprinted in his head at the dawn of life. And he will struggle to rid himself of them.

Thanks to early schooling, which Ivan is getting through the care of Helen Mařatková, one of the moulded forms in his head became the confrontation of classes. The dialectic of historical materialism has imprinted itself so deeply in him that he doesn't even realize how spontaneously he is using it.

One social class is always persecuted, and it is this one which is historically in the right. In the end it will win, but the devil knows when; some other time, when hell freezes over. The victory is inevitable – so is it really necessary for them to slog away too much? It'll happen regardless! No doubt it will only be temporary, which is perhaps better not to dwell on too much! And what then? Chiasm of history? Naturally, people do not know too much about this, they are feeling around and getting stuck. But to understand is important. Because it is important to survive.

That's how it is. No more, no less.

That he himself belongs, if anywhere, to the lowest class, Ivan doesn't doubt. His first view of the world was the cracked white ceiling floating high above him. In the corners there were repeatedly whitewashed, and consequently disfigured, indistinct stucco details and traces of cobwebs. Every face which stopped by him, descended down to him. And on the occasions that they lifted him up from the cot, to which he had been assigned, it would never be up as far as their eye level – never up to their face.

As long as he can remember, he has never felt truly cold and he has never been truly hungry. In light of his later historical studies, it could be said that he has had it damn good. The state of his stomach and abdomen, that soft complicated area, was his utmost priority and one to which he was thoroughly devoted from the very first moment, with complete and absolute attention. It was the *be-all and end-all* to him. His stomach was his soul mate. It is his own, it never bullshits him and never plays tricks on him. Such is its character – strange, but which Ivan quite understands – that it somehow never gets completely full. For a long time Ivan himself hadn't felt hunger, for he didn't particularly enjoy sucking down something from an annoying rubber teat – but his stomach was not yet content to purr and stretch like a satisfied cat. And when it was content, Ivan was content! Only, occasionally he needs help.

Whoever drinks, must belch. The sooner the better in order not to hold up the nurses. Such a belch is purely a social act. If Ivan left it to his stomach to act only when it deigned to, it would be... Ivan didn't know how it would turn out. But he was definitely afraid to take the risk. He wanted to be a nice, decent toddler. In that cot he was already managing a lovely smile. You see something other than the ceiling, and so you draw apart your lips. He realized briskly enough that he shouldn't smile at each and every person. He must choose. Because a smile is not only a learned reflex; it is... a thing of strategic importance. Later, when words come, he'll call it a weapon and shield.

Because Ivan not only takes care of himself, but also his stomach. And it is a little sod. There is an eternal slight void. As if it was even gently blowing within him.

“It's drafty here, isn't it?” said one of the old hags, for whom he hadn't a name, as they bustled around the cage-like cribs with a rag on a broom reeking of disinfectant. Perhaps she was actually quite young, but the age of the others Ivan will learn to distinguish only when he himself starts to get older. The broom had a long handle and when the old one hag left, the ventilator under the high ceiling never stayed open. The bottles of disinfectant were scattered around the floor. The air above had a texture and even a tinge of left-standing mashed carrot. The windows were also white, whitewashed to such an extent that it was impossible to see anything through them. From the air vent – if it was open – cold strands of air would occasionally descend which were worth examining. It was possible to absorb it, to have a sniff, a taste, and then gulp it down. Ivan would eagerly turn his chin towards it, snatch at it, and send it down to his stomach. It was pleasant for both him and his stomach. The swallowed air tickled so.

To the left and to the right of him, occasionally shuffling around, babies similar to him lay there in rows. From time to time there would be a small whimper, seldom a real cry.

“These kids don't even scream much. They know that there's no point...”

The first truths are steadfastly simple. Children fix their eyes on the handle of a window. It's solid, nicely twirled, interesting. It would be good to grasp it and suck it. Properly relish the brass. Only it's too far away. The child then protracts all four paws, opens its mouth, tongue wagging. In the corner saliva is appearing. Perhaps it has a guardian angel: instead of deprivation syndrome from lack of stimulation, they develop the capability of imagined satisfaction.

On the tongue it tastes of metal. Or at least it seems like this taste, somewhat chillingly penetrating. He hears in himself an approving response. His stomach has concluded that all is well.

basic fundamentals would explain/introduce the thought processes of Immanuel Kant to aspiring pedagogues: “And now imagine that the world is a huge beautiful sandpit. It's huge because we are small. The sand is proportionately sieved through and moist, directly tempting for playing. We'll make sandcastles! This form is space and this one is time...yes? - Never underestimate clarity, dear colleagues!”

IV.

It beneficial to be nice. It requires only the ability to know when to display it. For example to read well. Whoever sees Ivan with a book lavishes praise on him. Fewer and fewer people are reading these days, and even Aunt Emma would rather knit than read. It's a treasured activity, exclusive only to some, and, as Ivan discovered from the moment he managed his very first letter, so easy and entertaining!

And what is bad in the eyes of the aunts? Helen Mařatková, the Comrade Director, is going beyond the bounds of her workload, already going through inappropriate institutional publications with the children.

"We're going to organize a voluntary working group, we're getting rid of this rubbish!" she declared excitedly. "The collection of old papers is a responsibility of the new modern age! And you'll be getting points towards the competition!"

The books were lying on the ground, then carried on a wheelbarrow by the older boys to be dumped in the scrapyard. They got money for it, but they were not allowed to keep it. A warden who went with them shoved the money into his pockets. What remained for them was merely the validation of how many trees they were saving by these actions. They were quite pissed off by this, which was understandable to Ivan.

He himself feels bitterness, albeit for other reasons, namely not having managed to read most of those books! He had taken them for granted; he believed they had absolutely no value for the others and were waiting for him. But now all that remains is the stifling aroma of dust and plenty of space on the shelves. The emptiness resembles the void in his stomach. A dry gulp and he shifts from one foot to another.

Perhaps a little too prominently, for Helen noticed him.

"And don't you be sad," she tells the blonde haired golden boy, this apparent calm ocean of a lad.

"I know you love books. It's nice. But don't feel regret for these! These were bourgeois schmaltz! These books lied, you know that? They deliberately lied in order to harm us! And that is bad, isn't it? They were already old! Now we've got new truths! You'll see, soon we'll get lots of new ones. And not made up, but ones which you can trust!"

"It's a joke that money is still given for them, anyway..." Laco declared broodily. "Old paper... fine! Or it would be fine if it weren't for that fucking old knob forever sniffing around our arses for dosh..."

Helen, oblivious to her own ardour, goes on debating with her wards even after dinner, when she was supposed to having some old fucker 'massage her feet', so they could be left to play in peace. Well that's how her attempts are perceived by Laco Bacsi; though he, naturally, expressed himself somewhat more crudely.

The Comrade Director adores the horrors of war. She speaks about them with loving affection:

"You don't realize just how lucky you are that you can now live in peace. You don't deserve this fortune, you didn't suffer for peace, you have to be worthy of it! You have no idea how many people suffered in order for you to live like this! Among us lived heroes. They suffered but they didn't betray. They were tortured. They were dying and they died... Especially the Soviet people, they suffered the worst of all. For us all they suffered... bravely and... obstinately..."

Helen is not a big speaker and the listeners in faded old tracksuits, seated in a circle around her on the floorboards, aren't taking much notice. The war had happened before they were born and since that time everything has been supposedly different. The world is now in a fundamentally different state, as though the iced armour had been penetrated; spurting out the elixir of life...

Ivan isn't sure whether or not he's sleeping; the room around him is swaying and floating. The evening is wearing on. Occasionally it's quite tricky even to sit, so droopy are his eyelids.

"Whoever was born before the victorious February³ doesn't stand a chance, children... not a chance," the ugly woman repeats to them, patiently and factually. "They will die weighed down by evil, they won't be able to shake off this burden. Any attempt is futile... The lucky ones of you will grow up into a new world..."

Ivan is leaning against a wall. Now he's certainly not sleeping; his stomach within him was tense and crying out. Ivan could hear it well. Inwardly, he was calculating. Once again he is unfortunate, he arrived in the world too soon. He's batting for the weaker team. It's close though, he's behind by a nose, but still – a good half of those faded faces around him have undoubtedly forever missed the train.

In this, the hideous woman is completely clear: that before this major watershed moment people lived in a cruel and heroic world, full of fallacy and enemies. Only in small amounts from them did a light glimmer, a star twinkle, a spark burn brightly – expressions so fixed that Ivan imagined these indescribable heroes as nymphs in a morass. Something like cursed fairies.

From the obtrusive fog enemies usually surfaced (they had long greatcoats, helmets and motorbikes with sidecars). They captured a fairy and interrogated her:

"Who are you?"

"A pixie."

"You're lying!"

Then the first wallop. And no longer will it be a pixie. It spits out a bloody tooth.

³ 1948, communist coup d'état

“You are a fairy! Own up! Where are the others?”

There follows an enthusiastic description of torture:

“And now imagine your nails being pulled out... and that's nothing! That's only the beginning!”

Perhaps nothing hurts fairies, otherwise they simply wouldn't be able to bear it! A proper fairy holds out, says nothing, doesn't rat on fellow fairies, dying a lengthy festering death in a cooling puddle of blood and yellowish vomit, broken, lapping up their own piss, but in spite of, still saying nothing. And if she did say something, she would be dishonourable. All fairies for one and one fairy for all! To be without honour, to be a traitor, is a shockingly horrifying means of negation.

“You really cannot imagine, how lucky you are and also how little you deserve it,” Comrade Director repeats softly, and then heads towards a cunning finale: “You take it for granted that everything is now different, that now we have different values! I have here a disciplinary book, everything is written here. For any offence by an individual, the whole room will suffer! Don't think that I don't know! And what I don't know, I will find out! I could immediately freeze your points, but that would be too easy. I know it, of course... but now I want to hear it from you ...who was it?”

Now nobody is dozing, even Laco Bacsí raised a half-closed eyelid.

“Who was it of you who tried to sell *Oleg Koshevoy*?”

Ivan clutches his nostrils. A flock of half-washed brats in semi-dirty clothing would naturally mildly reek, especially having had peas for dinner. But now, having also acquired last year's air of quite another level; it stinks of shit. The real facts of the offence in question, though, are missing. Just who the fuck is Oleg? Only Ivan anticipates that is concerns a book.

“And *Young Guard*? And *Darkness*? And....”

Ivan hears how the director's voice falters with genuine... genuine horror...”

“...and *The Land, Where Tomorrow Means Yesterday* and *The Communist Manifesto*?”

Horror abates into silence.

“Do you even realize...”

Her voice has approached the borders of articulable and gasped.

“It's not only theft, it's... it's...”

From poor Helen's mouth escapes the word *blasphemy*. All of a sudden, she has no idea, how to follow with it.

“You know who it was! The one who committed this crime is an enemy to us all. And you are protecting him.”

Now there is a silence, resilient and glowering.

“Shame on you! This is false solidarity!”

There is a weak tang of copper on the tongue.

“I will now go and stand in the corridor for five minutes. And between you, you will make those mangy sheep own up.”

The door is shut behind her. The silence is soundproof. The unsightly woman returns.

“So once again, I'll explain it to you. You have mixed-up notions. This concerns the welfare of you all,”

she says quite affably and she looks around at them with a beseeching smile.

“Whoever now stands up and says who it was, will not be an informer! He will be a hero!”

And then it happens to Ivan for the first time. He suffers a momentary cerebral ‘short’. Everything goes blue. He can see only himself, how he stands up and goes towards the woman – she isn't tall, he doesn't even have to stand on tiptoes – and gives her slap, a nice double, first with the palm and then back with the back of the hand. Smack! It cuts through the silence like a scalpel through a puss-infused ulcer.

There is still silence. Ivan hears the quiet and only then does he take fright. He is still leaning against the wall as he had been previously, his crossed legs are numb, lying on the floor next to him is Laco. Nothing had happened. Ivan looks at his hand with disbelief. If something had happened – and he would swear that it had! – nobody saw it...

V.

In year six he qualified for the regional level competition for creativity of young people in the field of Russian recitation, which wasn't especially difficult. Although the subject area was open to everyone, it was never particularly strongly assigned, and anybody capable in some way of emulating the oak barrel sounding and vibrating resonance of the Russian accent could succeed. In the home they showed the wards Russian films every second Wednesday afternoon, from a ramshackle projector operated by the spotty warden Lendl, who then, with aunt Alena in the closet on the sports mats...

Ivan had always snooped a little; knowledge brings certain privileges. But nothing any further. He holds his tongue as though he was never there. In this he is adept, it was always most simple just to trust him. The regional level competition in Russian recitation is held in the community hall of the regional committee for Prague-east. For the second time he has been allowed to go there alone.

Solitude is the greatest luxury, nobody has ever convinced him otherwise. Just to be able to go for a stroll and not be brought to book for it. Not to have to watch your back for the minutest of moments.

The institution, which for the period of school attendance is his home, stands not far from Prague, on the river in a

picturesque region, which is being transformed from a previously impoverished area into a town suburb. Strwn around are decaying orbiculate churches with foundations from time immemorial, most are used as storerooms for animal feed. Travelling around them on a bicycle, and sorrowfully caressing the map-like surface created by the crumbling facades is their clerical guardian, Father František Ondříček.

Father Ondříček had a vicarage in Brodec behind the church. His gate was still not – as would happen later – boarded up with planks, and Ivan on his explorative journeys naturally found himself here. A remarkable building and for him a garden of mysteries. Whenever he came to it, it was forever closed.

Holy mass Mon-Sat: 7.00, Sun: 8.30

So it opens only for mass then. And what actually is it, this mass? In those dozen years that Ivan has been on this world, nobody has ever explained this word to him. He was aching to know what it was. Only he cannot leave the home in the mornings and on Sunday it is also forbidden. Those staying there also through the weekend have organized free time and there is always some kind of activity taking place.

So at the very least he peeks into the small window at the rear. Bits of glass in the lead frame are missing, and inside, from time to time, a ray of light pierces through. What could all that sparkling gilt, the fancy carved curved adornments around the dark pictures, be for? He had been spotted there a couple of times by Father Ondříček. He couldn't help himself; on the third occasion he lay in wait for him. He knew how to creep about silently.

“Perhaps it would interest you how it looks inside?”

Little Ivan looks at him and is silent. Or maybe he nods, but not immediately. Father Ondříček is round-shouldered and in his round face sparse light bristly eyebrows shield small tearful, but lively eyes. To a boy's eyes he has no age. He is ancient.

“So come in, I'll show you around. I'll unlock the door for you.”

The church is dim and damp, but not musty or fusty, nor does it contain that well-known and well-disliked stench of too many people congregated together. It is somehow a different aroma, distant and abandoned. As if it were saying something.

Ivan doesn't know what it says to him.

“What a good boy you are,” the Father declares when he see how studiously and carefully he is proceeding around the dissected room. “Would you like to minister to me through mass?”

And immediately he laughs, in order to be certain that the boy could perchance understand it as a joke. Ivan is slightly alarmed. He understands this tone of voice.

“What is that?” he asks, and quickly adds: “please?” for he knows the role of *nice young lad* inside out and manages it line by line.

“You would help me in the service to God. Here – you see...“the Father gestures him towards the table, above which in the dark there seems to be something elaborate. “The most mysterious transformation is arising, here we enjoy the highest blessing. Wouldn't you like to experience it too?” and again he lets out an uncertain and embarrassed laugh, as if he were retracting the previous meaning of the words. He looks innocuous. He looks as though he is afraid of Ivan.

“I'd like to,” Ivan declares sincerely. “I'd like to, but perhaps I can't. I can't really do anything.”

And now for a change he laughs with a humble and appellatant laugh.

VI.

So the conversation developed, before long he came again and soon everything was clear to him. He had found his father!

“Your father is God the Father Almighty,” Father Ondříček told him. “He is father of us all, but we are not looking for him, we don't give a damn about him. But you were looking for him and now you have found him. Now you are no longer an orphan. He is your Father and he loves you, and he needs you and invites you to him, you know that?”

A considerable number of Ivan's co-wards actually have a mother, though particular unpleasant to the extent, that any right-minded person would say thanks, but no thanks. To have an father is a much more precious commodity, maybe quite fictitiously. Such a father is usually in prison. And what use is your old man when he's in the slammer?

Laco Bacsí comes from a wide family, about whom he recounts quite wild tales. Those who hadn't drunk themselves to death, and who hadn't stabbed someone before drinking themselves to death, had certainly hanged themselves. Laco has sisters, more than he can count. But... but Ivan never especially wanted to really hear about it.

And suddenly he couldn't give a shit about any of them, so miniscule were these polished shits.

If the Lord is his father, then Ivan is surely the son of God. That is really something. The thought of it! Ivan turns it over in his head, it's intoxicating. Those wonderful stories concerning him, Ivan, personally! Jesus, the first born son of God, wanted, naturally, to help people. Clearly a hero. And for this his own people pinched and squeezed him, and throttled him until he met his death – but he actually survived it. Because he had the Father to back him up and he was – and is – the absolute best and nobody can or will ever match him. Ivan has a father and Jesus is his brother. They are a family. His elder

brother had his friends around him, the Apostles. Clearly he could have known how it would turn out. Judas squealed on him and Peter three times betrayed him. His brother suffered a strange, unlucky, terrible, stupid fate – but now he is famous. And Mary, so gentle, wise and sweet. This one isn't of course Ivan's mother, nobody has ever tried to claim it. Ivan, however, doesn't need a mother. She couldn't even have been his mother, because she was a Virgin, and somehow she couldn't shake this off...

“You know, to be a virgin is beautiful. It's a value, the highest degree of purity,” says Father Ondříček, but Ivan doesn't really understand why. What about this is so astonishing? However, it soon comes to light; her mother, granny Ann, was a virgin too when she had her! Saint Ann... so self sufficient!

Ivan likes it immensely and doesn't pay attention and bursts out laughing. And Father Ondříček gets angry, he goes red like a turkey, and also loses concentration. He strikes him one, to such an extent that the boy's head flies sideways and his ears ring. And this cuff somehow persuades Ivan – no one slap is like another. It is as if Father Ondříček were telling him by this that he really cares about him and the Lord Father cares even more. Then once more it was fine as normal. And Ivan knew from that moment what has meaning and what he wanted to accomplish in life.

2. THE PATHS TO THE FATHER

I.

*How was it, fairy-tale?
The chick did stray
in the garden, by the drying hay...*

Ivan has no idea how this stupid rhyme got into his head. Surely he himself did not make it up? Perhaps there, somewhere under that white ceiling, they had had it read to them. Certainly improbable enough, but how could it have been any other way. Without a doubt Ivan doesn't remember it, which is good since good memory can also be a proper poison. For example, this rhyme continues:

*Chirp chirp,
little feet hurt*

And it is, Ivan judges, just a fucking game of mega proportions, this whiny chirping chick is just asking for a rendezvous with a roasting pan. As long as Ivan wants to follow his Father, it will better only to open his trap advisedly. And that's exactly what he wants, to learn absolutely everything about Him and do absolutely everything for Him. Maybe he could be of some help to the Father; as Ivan looks around, he's getting the impression that the Lord Father certainly doesn't have it easy.

"I have a plan for you," Father Ondříček began after some time. "But, my boy, it won't be easy. We must be *as cunning as a snake and as quiet as a dove*." And he laughed with that laugh, that one that was like he didn't actually mean it so seriously. Nevertheless, he then looked at him probingly and with hope.

"I know well that you would like to minister to me. But Ivan, you won't start this until you start at university. So it's important that you get accepted for it. After all, we don't want to ruin it immediately. If you are to study theology, you'll definitely need to pass your state examinations."

Ivan smiles. He is now one year away from completing his school studies and he can count on one hand the number of times he has dropped below A grade. Into his essays entitled *What I want to be when I grow up* he writes standardly and neatly:

I very much respect the education which is given to me. I would like to study at university in order to be of the utmost use to our state and socialist establishment.

It can't be any better than this for him. Until he completes the final state exams next year, the children's institution will provide him with shelter and sustenance. And then?

"The Lord takes care of us, along his path he leads us. Complicated are the paths of God," declared Father Ondříček and he then got down to work, in order to clear the way along the paths. How he did this, Ivan never quite understood, and he wasn't overly bothered by it either.

The relationship between the State and the Church – the two entwined and reciprocally overlapping power structures with distinct centres – had always been interesting, the battle over investiture attests to this. After the break-up of the Austria-Hungarian empire, it was none too easy here for the Roman Catholic church, it was as if a state led by a communist party wanted rid of it completely. In its confrontational view, it represented above all great organization from the Vatican-driven spy network.

In Czechoslovakia though, the separation of the Church from the state never happened; the state did not renounce on its commitment to take care of its ideological enemies along economic as well as social lines. The simplest situation for the state was with those who were detained immediately. However, the state wasn't radical enough, a considerable portion of the clergy remained free and had, therefore, the status of state employees. This set-up opened up here some kind of maneuverable space for pragmatic self-preservation.

In these post-war times the legal existence and also the effective operation of theological studies are, paradoxically, the piquant result of complicated trench warfare. In Litoměřice, a small town north of Prague, the theological department had now found its refuge, having been removed in 1950 from the register of departments in the prestigious Charles University, and banished altogether from Prague in 1953. It is, however, a state school and a state school completely reimbursing its expenses; being under the auspices of the Ministry for Culture and Education, which is, of course, overseen by the Ecclesiastical Department of the Ministry of the Interior, which expresses a systematic and competent interest in anyone who lectured there or registered there to study.

So what of it? He, who pays, decides, declared the state. But the Church also held on to something. Whoever wanted to take the entrance exams had to present an application signed by the custodian of his parish. Candidates would be chosen and sent out by the parish itself at their own trouble and expense. At this school, any kind of system of social or financial scholarship did not exist. Whoever successfully defended their doctoral work and graduated, obtained the title ThDr.

Functioning concurrently with the faculty in Litoměřice is also a theological seminary; the state also carries the cost of

its operation. Those desiring to achieve ordination require a recommendation from the head of the seminary, discussed in its entirety by the relevant clerical department of the Ministry of the Interior. If everything goes smoothly, a state endorsement and workplace admittance are also obtained...

Father Ondříček will dispatch himself for the consultation in Prague.

"I'll level with you. I talked it over with our bishop and there are two hitches," he tells Ivan diffidently after his return. "It's a pity, Ivan dear, that you are so smart. They give priority to those – how should I say it – to those like me... simpletons." And for certainty he laughs.

"I'm not smart at all," Ivan declares. "I learn easily, but that really doesn't mean anything!"

He's right, but the father looks at him scoldingly. "Pride is a deadly sin," he remarks. "We humans are weak..."

"Even a saint sins daily seventy seven times," Ivan interjects, as if he isn't taking it seriously.

"Well, I will somehow explain that to them... The second thing is that I feel sorry for my parishioners..."

For this he has good reasons. At the start of the 1960s the regular churchgoers amounted to five inertial women, and the quiet, proud and stricken core of the childless, or the reckless. Other parishioners included the polite, unobtrusive former head pharmacist, currently a laboratory technician in a chemical factory, and the wife of the director of a sugar refinery, now a porter in a quarry. Former masters...

This meagre group were charged with sustaining Ivan for his studies and none of them could; their worn-down and patched-up elbows bearing witness to the previous depths they had already had to dig into their pockets.

And now in front of them Father Ondříček had to step forward with a request for financial assistance and regular contributions. Ivan can only lower his eyes. Unpleasant certainly, but it is the way of things. Ready money is a problem... He is not living badly, but he never has any. And he has no idea, who would have any. Someone certainly has it, but those whom Ivan knows, are living right now hand to mouth. Father Ondříček himself has a shabby cassock, and Ivan knows well with what childlike enthusiasm he clubs together the pennies. The leaking church roof will not repair itself.

"Let the roof fall down! Let it fall! The Lord will forgive me for badly maintaining His house... The Church is not just about any building, it is a living community in Christ..."

Father Ondříček was excited and when he gets excited, he is rapidly short of breath. He has to clutch his heart.

"What I have is yours. Books. My clothes too. But you must not grow too much, if you are going to fit into them."

"I promise that I won't eat too much," Ivan says and he smiles. At that moment they both sense victory.

II.

The river Elbe is – in spite of its defects – a cunning lover of fortune. It begins in a mountain meadow with a lovely view, not in a black pool in a prohibited area like the poor river Vltava. Peacefully, and unceasingly it flows across the border into East Germany and then even across the borders of the states of the Warsaw pact and into Hamburg, the starting point for a considerable amount of emigrants setting sail for America.

The whole thing is completely and absolutely unimaginable. It is beyond me, it doesn't interest me, I have no idea why I'm thinking about it, reflects a spindly youngster, who in a rare moment of freedom, had taken to walking across a causeway with textbooks under arm and a black notebook in a worn pocket. He looks fragile; he has disproportionately narrow shoulders, and the fine hair on his round skull already seems to be thinning out.

It is the year 1966 and he has already been here for four years, preparing for a clerical career. He has never before worked so hard and will never do so again. The Theological Seminary binds aspirants to the priestly programme for eighteen hours a day. The building received for this purpose from the state, which had in 1950 closed every existing diocesan seminary, was most fitting, with Austrian-like thoroughness and gloom – for ninety years it had previously been the refuge of ninety deaf-mutes.

Ivan can tolerate the disciplinary code well, for he has never known anything other than the communal bedroom anyway. Concerning his studies, he remains a good diligent student. And waiting for the theology students, as at every university, are the common core subjects: P.E., history of the labour movement, Russian language, fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism... basically that which he has been used to since early childhood. However, here they are applying themselves to these subjects somewhat more thoroughly and more responsibly in every aspect. These topics for disputation are equally as good as any other. And, according to the principles of *Get to know your enemy...* this is not a problem for him.

He will succeed. He will gain the path to his Father. He will learn everything. He has always learned everything. He will prevail over himself and his Father will make himself known to him. Ivan will recognize Him and He will open his arms to him.

“You are my key to the heavenly gates, Ivan dear,” Father Ondříček would say every time, whenever Ivan would come visit him. “For you, there will be forgiveness for my numerous sins...”

Willingly he then piles into his head as much Latin and Greek as he can fit, with extra smidgens of Hebrew and as much of Thomas Aquinas and novotomism as the State Supervising Committee permits. Furthermore, the *trinity theology*, which is the doctrine of the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost and the teaching about Christ, which is the doctrine of the one, whose brother he is; and *pneumatology*, about the Holy Ghost; and *harmatology*, about sins and redemption; and *soteriology*, about salvation; and *eschatology*, about the last artifacts of a person; and *sacramental theology*, which is the teaching of sacrament; and *angelology and demonology*, which concerns the invisible world...

Together with Father Ondříček Ivan did simply whatever could be done in order for him to study all of the doctrines and he jumped into it with both feet. He wanted to be something worthy to his Father!

Unfortunately he comes to realize that he meets oft circular proves there. He mulls over it uncomfortably from time to time, having no one to confide in. Perhaps he shouldn't trouble himself so much about it.

Ultimately, belief is mystery and mercy.

“And this is what you must accept, dear Ivan. Faith is mystery and mercy.”

Father Ondříček was always stating this sentence as though it was an undertaking; he drew his teeth together and at the same time puckered his lips and fixed his eyes almost desperately on Ivan. He served God proportionately to circumstance and at his place he remained until he died a natural death from heart disease, something which many of his colleagues at that time were unable to accomplish.

Father Ondříček died the previous year and Ivan has as yet been unable to mourn his death. He doesn't even have the impression of being anymore more alone. That is unless it is possible to name this vague uncertain inkling where his days seemed to be spinning in circles. It was as if his head had ice cold finger running through it.

On top of that he is not in any way convinced that he will eventually reunite with Father Ondříček in heaven. Father Ondříček certainly belongs there; he even, formally speaking, died reconciled, duly provided with the Last Rites... so... as long as our Father who art in Heaven is only even a little righteous...

Only thoughts like this are a sin. He, Ivan, is a sinner. And if only it were just that. Some things it isn't possible either to redress or to conceal, at best to wipe over with a handkerchief and confide them to one's confessor. And even before that the Lord Father will have already learnt about these. The Lord Father; Ivan's father; the omniscient.

From a certain time it had been as though the stony corridors of the former institute for the deaf-mutes had become somewhat colder.

In Father Ondříček he cannot now confide. A rational person knows that for what one is unable to do, one must not – or rather cannot – even be sorry! And anyway, Ivan had recently taken to turning his nose up at Father Ondříček's rather phlegmatic and businesslike theology.

“In Heaven there is more pleasure to be derived from just a single reformed sinner than from...”

Father Ondříček was a pure person! And that is the bottom line.

And Ivan is starting to be afraid that he won't manage to reshape himself.

Faith is mystery and mercy. Without a doubt. In this formulation an abyss is hidden, but will the Father forgive Ivan for not managing to plunge into it? Will he perhaps find favour in Ivan for at least descending uncertainly down the rope?

Abstinence? The promise of purity? Why not!

Ivan assumes to know what the Father is pursuing with these prohibitions; he should become a soldier serviceman of the Lord, not a slave of the body... which is something that Ivan really wouldn't want. And why should he. After all, he knows well that there is nothing desirable about that! He wants to be with Father. By him and with him. To serve? Fine. If it is only a question of method.

He soon grows gaunt, and from kneeling on the cold floor he gets inflammation of the kneecaps. It hurts him, he would like to put cheese curd on them. Cheese curd takes away fever, Aunt Emma had told him that, but immediately added that she was saying it only to him and he must not tell it to anyone because it is a secret. And because it is old-fashioned and unhygienic.

During this recollection of Aunt Emma and of her disconsolate and sweaty hands with swollen joints, Ivan starts to feel ashamed. It occurred to him, that now he is even emotionally blackmailing his Father a little.

He knows himself. He knows how coolly his head works. He hasn't made any progress.

«My father, whose son I am, is neither a sentimental old pedagogue, nor a slow-witted cadre, nor petrified school headmaster, from whom I had to willy-nilly win stamps of commendation. I wished to devote a life to service in His name. And now I am here. I am here.»

The cold, the chill is tormenting; it has no presence in this part of the mystery. Ivan's wintercoat is pitiful, shabby and short, inherited it from some littl'un. He had kept his promise that he would not eat too much, but in spite of this he grew. He sleeps in the communal bedroom and gulps down state subsidized food, but in his pockets he doesn't have a penny. Or rather he shouldn't have it. What the parish does not club together, he doesn't have – and the parish doesn't bend over backwards for him by any means. The position after Father Ondříček has remained vacant. The new one, who will perhaps be appointed there, doesn't know Ivan. Father Ondříček died suddenly; from him Ivan inherited some old towels and a crumpled tin box containing a shaving kit. The remainder of his things were taken by his family; Ivan hadn't even suspected that the priest had any. At eighteen he left the children's home. As a goodbye present Aunt Emma gave him a sewing kit.

“It's a nice practical present, but you won't know what it's for. You'll have to find a girl soon, Ivan my love...”

He smiled at her, he was now taller than her.

“And write to me, Ivan dear...”

There still remains plenty that he has to buy, only with what? His fellow students of theology are largely obliging sons from settled pious families; from them he can get nothing but a Moravian accent.

But that is now the last thing which should be considered as important.

For the Father is Love, and love is a terrible and brutal thing.

3. THE DESCENT OF THE HOLY GHOST

I.

Ivan met her on the causeway. She spoke Slovakian, but in a strange way. She was from somewhere in the east, where verbal forms behave like splattered cream on the side of a big institutional bowl of pudding – silently sliding down and distending into the Carpathian Ruthenian⁴, of unwritten, and for Czechs around Prague difficultly definable forms.

She approached him herself, she said that her name was Jana and that she was studying medicine. In Košice⁵. And that she didn't have any money for the train fare. She needed to get home. She stuttered out that one sentence and then fixed her eyes examiningly on him.

He didn't know what to reply.

On her arms she had scratches and a grazed knee.

"It's nothing," she said when she noticed him staring, "and what's with you standing there like an idiot? What's your name?"

She laid the scratched arm on his chest and presses. Ivan stepped backwards and nearly fell down, because it is the end of the causeway and the start of weeping willows. When she touched him, something happened. He was not an innocent or naïve boy, nor exactly a greenhorn; whoever grew up where he did, learnt various things and soon had the opportunity to try it out in real life, sometimes not even when he would wish to. Only...

But Jana had touched him and he had lost his balance, though he didn't fall down from the causeway into the coffee-like liquid, for he grabbed both her hands with his, his hands holding hers. Suddenly he has the impression that everything is just right. The world is finally in order, it has gained order – perhaps the Holy Ghost has descended. Ivan has always had somewhat issues with the Holy Ghost. He understood that it is supposed to awaken in him spiritual fervour, the zeal of the apostles, but for him it had been so far somewhat... until now. Suddenly he knows it. It had happened. Peter, a fisherman, a simple man, who quite suddenly spoke when he shouldn't have, who betrayed Jesus, spoke with an impassioned tongue hitherto unknown to himself. Something or other in him had drawn near and pierced through the barrier. He listened to himself, the words were flowing out with gusto! And those who were with him transformed, then preached, and people understood them...

Ivan realizes that he himself could now go to the stake. He could with pleasure burn for his faith.

Somehow they found themselves among the willow trees, either she had drawn him there or he her. There is an undergrowth of nettles and individual stones, loose from the causeway and jutting out sharply. He doesn't mind the pain, it multiplies the joy. Vividly he takes in the aroma of early-spring water. With a darting thought he recollects the institution and the quick-fire prayers, which could in one moment redeem a sinner. It also means that he is starting to understand Durych⁶. His brief moment of pleasure is replaced by one of grief. And this grief has an unusual, strangely definitive feeling.

"So you'll help me out with the train fare, right?" Jana then says. Ivan sees from close range her mouth and her words sound strange, perhaps because from equally close range she can also see his.

"I will... I'll give you everything," he affirmed. It was so clear that there was no need to talk about it. "And why do you want to leave?"

"And what else is here for me?"

She has a large mouth and nice strong teeth. One incisor is, however, broken and on another there is a black stain, decay perhaps?

"You will be here with me," he said and laughed; that same laugh used by Father Ondříček, which could be taken back instantly, and immediately he feels ashamed of himself. He also feels something cold and sharp in his diaphragm. He doesn't know yet, what hurts so much, and he simply doesn't want to take anything back. Only he hadn't realized until now just how much he missed Father Ondříček. And he missed him terribly, it was as though he had a lacerated rib cage, protruding wide open with a draught passing between the ribs. Like this it is not possible to live.

«With her I will be complete,» he says to himself and starts to kiss her. She lets him. For a while she returns the kiss, but then she pulls away.

"Well, aren't you a... What are you actually doing here, anyway?"

"I'm studying here," he says, "in a seminary."

"Wow!" she exclaims. "And what exactly?"

"Theology," he replies. It is quite apparent that at this given moment it clearly isn't the most integral issue

⁴ Now a part of Ukraine, Carpathia Ruthenia was formally the easternmost part of Czechoslovakia

⁵ The biggest city in Eastern Czechoslovakia, now Slovakia.

⁶ Jaroslav Durych (1886-1962), a Czech catholic writer. His favorite topic was a pleasure of martyrdom.

at hand.

“So you will be a... a priest? Or a monk?” she said, and burst out laughing.

That afternoon he sold the watch from Aunt Emma and organized... well, organized enough to provide him what he needed right now. Then he bought two tickets for the express train. At dusk he left with Jana for Košice.

What happened after is not completely clear. In the train Ivan was happy. It isn't certain, whether he will ever again be so profligately, ecstatically clear-sightedly content. They were sitting tightly next to each other and they were touching with the maximum surface of skin. And where there was only their clothes making contact, their skin was immediately beneath it and it radiated and clung. Two ridiculously thin layers of fabric could not separate them and it wouldn't matter at all if they had been naked or clothed, or if someone did or didn't see them.

Meanwhile, they also talked and Ivan in the end could barely keep his eyes open. The train to Košice has been going for a long time and romantic feelings can be surprisingly intense and excruciating – perhaps like a slow roast. Finally Jana started to yawn and then fell asleep, limp and flaccid, and Ivan held her in his arms and it occurred to him that together they look like *the Pieta* in reverse. But it was fine. He cradled her like a child and she filled him with tremendous tenderness, but he didn't know that it could be named as such. For himself he labelled this unknown entity as a State of Grace. Of this he was certain, for until now he had never felt anything so balmy and so keenly.

Towards the morning Jana woke up and with a weary vehemence she declared that she wanted cocoa. So he set out on the hopeless quest for a buffet car, and at the same time he realized with astonishment what strong and numerous paradoxical feelings were currently dominating him.

1/ It was clear that was necessary to find cocoa.

2/ It was clear that he could not get cocoa, because he couldn't afford it.

3/ He was glad that in this dirty train at half past four in the morning and somewhere in central Slovakia cocoa probably wouldn't be available.

4/ Which was a huge personal ignominy.

5/ He was currently in debt to her of one cocoa and everything that would further happen would be his fault.

To sum up, he was already doomed to helplessness because he would not manage to give her what she wanted. Naturally it would not be so easy! Now it was true and real. Now it was only just beginning. Now it was showing... the state of the Holy Ghost's descent – a state of rapture remained.

After arriving, Jana kisses him on the platform, she smiles at him and asks him to go back again. For she has to... study... and she doesn't have a flat only for herself either. There is five of them in only two rooms. Where would she put him?

He is left staring at her, unable to speak a word.

She hugs him and looks at him close-up from below; she is only a little smaller than him.

“Come on, my Ivan, my little priest... don't be so sad... Know that I love you, OK? And you will come again for me, right? Will you come to see me? In two weeks, my house mates are going home for Sunday... we'll be alone... you'll come, huh?”

“But can I at least walk you home?” he asks, his voice choked as though soot were scratching his throat with every word. Acquiescent meekness will apparently be a component in these things. An integral component.

She looked at him and nodded so he took the bag with things which he had the previous day bought for her and they set off. He is following her into an unknown town city and he takes a deep breath and swallows. The air tastes of metal, for, as it crossed his mind, in Košice there are some Ironworks, he doesn't know anything else about the place.

They didn't go far. On an unmarked street only a stone's throw from the square she took the bag from his hand and without so much as a goodbye she vanished into a drab characterless house. For a moment he gazed at it. All of the entrance gates in the street are new and each looks equally tinny and ugly. In this time houses were not kept locked, but he didn't even try to enter, instead turning round and going back to the station, and back the 750 kilometres to Litoměřice. He went without paying for a ticket and he was still feeling happy.

II.

Thereupon spring broke out, full of chaotic events. Father Ondříček would certainly have remarked that ‘man proposes, God disposes’.

According to original expectations he should have finished his studies in the summer, naturally with a distinction. And then he would request an ordination, and as long as the rector of the seminary concluded that he was to be conscripted, those somewhere in a higher place would start to go through his personal history and credentials. If these proved to be satisfactory, he could take the irrevocable sacrament of service to the priesthood, and waiting for him would be his first mass. The following Autumn he would then commence

military service in order to defend his socialist motherland. And assuming he survived this in good health, the state would then perhaps assign him a parish, where he would disseminate to God's people the word of God. Ivan doesn't contemplate whether this notion of preaching to the converted is a bit strange. What is fundamental is that he would be somewhat authorized by the people to stand before his Father face to face. And for that he would be getting paid!

On Ascension Day, however, Ivan is sitting around dazedly – still slightly bandaged and solidly fed by sedatives – at a group therapy session in a Psychiatric Institution in Bohnice⁷.

In the benign years of the sixties, group therapy was red-hot news and it was nourished as if it were some kind of exotic flower. The institution had become an asylum from the realities of the world for all kinds of reasons. Ivan, for example, will acquire there his definitive mindset, which in the course of the years will not change too much. He will, somehow, age prematurely there, become half-bald, only his eyes under overhanging eyelids occasionally flash like yellow cat's eyes.

For a long time he doesn't contribute anything substantial to the group session. He feels utterly impersonal, as though made from cast-iron; some pills have this horrible gift. This gift is called compassion, but beware; to be free of feelings is neither anyhow pleasant nor relieving. It is simply that; it is stunting and oppressive and it also carries with itself manifold problems, for someone for example, an eternal stream of saliva. Initially he would forget to wipe it away.

There doubtless exists somewhere a document which clarifies precisely why he was brought there. He himself is only catching onto that very slowly. Maybe he is analyzing the situation from overly wide circles. The remaining output of his muted mind murmurously flows like the waves of wind-swept wheat fields.

Roughly speaking, it is because of Laco Bacsí. The Comrade Director, the highest authority of their communal home, though meaning well, was perhaps a little too hyperactive. She didn't allow herself, nor the boys any time to rest. It was Saturday and they were supposed to be playing football. Instead she was telling them about the beauty of folk songs and at the same time beating a miniature cymbal with a drumstick. It was boring. And furthermore, unfair. It was a drag. Then she asked if anyone knew any such folk songs. Silence.

“But children, what have we been learning together every week? Well, what did we sing last time?”

Spring is coming, spring is coming; it will again be May,

Ivan knew, but didn't say. He considered this wearisome bleating melody to be an excruciating example of melancholy. Laco, however, put up his hand. Comrade Director came to a halt. This impudent lad liked singing and she couldn't pass up such a teaching opportunity.

“Yes, Laco?” She asked affably, hoping that she didn't sound uncertain.

“I know such a... from my grandmother. I would show you it, but it isn't Czech. It's like how our gran speaks.”

“It doesn't matter if we don't understand, Laco,” she responded with relief. «Knowing Laco, it's probably even better that way,» she thought to herself. “Only sing to us. We would love to listen to you, right children?”

And Laco looked at her and sang.

*“Nincsen nekem egyebem egy tetűnél
az is megdöglött a fülem tövébenél
Százán jöttek el a temetésére
Letelepedtek a fülem tövébe”⁸*

For a brief moment they both looked quizzically at each other. Then Comrade Director praised him and Laco burst out laughing with delight. The atmosphere loosened, the half-hour of folk lore finished, and the boys could go outside to play ball.

The melody got stuck in Ivan's head. He had always had a good memory, everybody said it, but hardly anyone knew just how good a memory Ivan really had.

It is strange anyway how such a mind works. He would swear that in his head he has nothing. That it is a hollow wooden object, maybe a beehive, chiselled out from a trunk and he is sitting within. He is the very last, the only remaining forgotten bee, humming absently.

Back in the Bohnice psychiatric institution, he is humming alone to himself and it is getting on his nerves. He doesn't know why he is doing it, it's not worth thinking about it. Those colourful sweets are capable of such things. They are issued here every morning, midday and evening and everyone has to swallow them on the spot in front of sister and they must then stick their tongue out so that she knows they aren't hiding them in their

⁷ district in the north of Prague, well known by its big madhouse

⁸ In [Ivan's] loose translation:

*All I have is a complete shit, no more than a louse
they snuffled away in my ear; now I don't have it anymore
With tears to it ran hundreds of its friends
They stayed in my ear; fuck the funeral*

mouths.

Ivan swallows his pills. He is the model patient, he cannot help it, he has excellence by disposition. And at night – in contrast to many – he sleeps well. He is used to the communal room. He doesn't want any recollections. And then, without any forewarning, who appears in his head but Laco Bacsí...

What was a couple of great and hectic weeks for Ivan had been a sorry loss for the seminary. From every barred room it was still possible to somehow break out. Ivan during the odd-numbered weeks frantically unloaded the wagons at the local station. He was grateful for every penny he could earn. Every even-numbered week he set off to Košice for the weekend. Understandably without a valid ticket. He was becoming from this an expert of railway toilets and the habits of the conductors.

During the even weekends, in that anonymous house with prefabricated gates, Jana would be alone.

He desperately needed money now, although with Jana no amount would be sufficient anyway. But that wasn't important, only that he had to think about it through the week. In order to scrape something together, he devoted that period of time which he had previously devoted towards preparing for a clerical career. He discovered that it was not too difficult, only time-consuming. And soon he had no other choice than to slip into Prague or Teplice. For certainty he could not go anywhere twice.

*And in warm furrows of dusty roads
Sagging into bows
It goes to steal elderflower spirits from the vineyards
A sleigh bell full of beaten tones*

Actions have meaning, words, never. In Litoměřice in those years the variety of bigger shops was very modest. And the second time he certainly wouldn't get away with it.

Until now he had never done anything similar to this, because he judged that the outcome would never be worth the risk. But now there was no avoiding it.

*Slightly sweaty. It's the way it is
Don't obstruct him, grass, it's a futile game
Forest know nothing, forest only listens
Gravity brings obliging calm
Some kind of crime. Then Jury please*

At night he would on the window sill in the passageway by the toilet and furiously etch out verses. Overpressure in his head formed into a rhythm; it worked as a safety valve. He didn't know until now that it was so easy.

*Juniper moss seaside pebbles
not to be taken as witnesses
Stealing through a slimy pathway
I'm coming to you*

In many churned out lines he explained to the Father that he, Ivan, was in the right. That he was doing good, the only right deed. And naturally he risks a lot. Already he knows what love is and Father also knows it. Or perhaps not? He himself had had that romance with the Virgin Mary, so he must have known where he was treading!

*A beautiful girl, and clever,
Only she wasn't given a heart
A cheater she was very sure about herself
it was late morning, before You find out
But Joseph trusted that she was still pure
And then to his and Your chagrin
You surrendered Your woman to us*

Ivan is being provocative, though Father remains silent; Ivan understands this silence as time-serving, not threatening. Maybe he is even smiling under the beard! After all He is Number One.

In the form of the Holy Ghost he descends... The Holy Ghost, of course! In the form of a dove, the enigmatic white all-penetrating bird...

*Tight lipped! The sea pours its salt
Through injection into veins and into arteries*

He had never seen the sea and he never read his verses for a second time. Although his argument in them was with his Father, he actually sent everything to Jana in Košice. She read them, folded them and placed them

into piles, and she appreciated them immensely. Or rather she was perplexed. They awoke in her confusion, disbelief and respect, all in an indistinguishable melange.

*Head between the knees, with his teeth grabbing the veins of sleep
Again on the road, hunting again
Over and beyond the oak, through the never-ending game
Wait! Look! I'm running. Wait! I'm coming to you*

Her room was a sorry slum, with nostalgic allusions of tawdry and threadbare small-town beauty. There were no books there at all, save for a couple of magazines. It was, however, a real room under an enclosure, and it was the only one in which Ivan found himself and could for a brief moment appear like a family man. To him it seemed wonderful.

He quizzed Jana about school and about the future and the past, but she answered very little.

“And you, my priest, my pater, my dog-collared one... how should I say it – what would you like to know? Well I go... I go into the library – to study, okay? I like it here, when we are here like this, but through the week there are vast numbers of people here, packed like sardines – only a lunatic would want that...”

For that matter, if she had also questioned him about this, he wouldn't have known how to respond to her at all.

III.

How it came to light, we honestly don't know. Perhaps he arrived a day earlier, or even at the wrong weekend. Maybe he managed to come by money too effectively – who knows – and now the clouds were gathering above him, he knew that like this it couldn't carry on forever. He was impatient, he wanted to solve it...

It is possible that a role in this was played by one of Jana's friends, a dark-haired, blue-eyed plump girl, whose name was Elena. On one occasion she poked her head in on them, when she wasn't supposed to be there and Ivan caught sight of her eyes. She had a most peculiar look, but in those blue eyes was scorn and also envy. Ivan took fright from them and instantaneously another one of Laco's songs jumped into his head. It was good. It could be useful. In Košice Hungarian is spoken a lot. He wondered what Elena was saying to his Jana. Jana understands her, she replies, but abruptly – Jana is great, the sooner Ivan learns this, the better. He wants to listen in, but instead ringing out in his head with graceless explicitness is:

*“Még azt mondják, Kolozsváron nincs kurva,
Hát a babám mégis akkor micsoda?
Kék a szeme, göndör haja fekete,
Az Isten is kurvának teremtette.”⁹*

He loved it when Laco sang. And the words stuck in his head. Such a strange collection of unheard words which he certainly he knows by sound, only not by meaning. No, he definitely doesn't know.

Perhaps Laco's song may well have been eventually to blame for it, even this is conceivable.

Or maybe Jana just had a good bit of business going on right now, a sweet deal. Russians came to the Košice ironworks, they wanted to let their hair down as Russians like to do; with splendour and with state approval. It was not the time for her to say no...

Jana knew her business, her clients occasionally prove to be malicious. For example there was that time when they took her into a train. They had promised her the world, they would go as far as foreign lands, Dresden and beef stroganoff, and, above all, cash, shoes and dresses, the bridge across the Elbe which is called Blue Wonder. How exotic...! Jana said to herself, I'm going into the world – I'm going to make it!

And wouldn't you know, it turned out to be the complete opposite. Jana didn't fleece them, they cleaned her out as the train was moving away from the station and threw her out from the wagon like a parcel. There she was left, on the Litoměřice causeway, bruised and beaten, without money, and without identification.

Luckily Jana is almost like a cat. Almost; she has eight lives. Again she was in a pickle, but once again she managed to escape from this. Incidentally, her name is not Jana of course, but she had always wanted to be so named, so why not? Jana is such a girly name, pure and sweet like pudding with raspberries. There is a song about a *little girl Jana*, only from where had she heard it...

Did Ivan, in Košice, behave overly aggressively? It isn't out of the question, but it was certainly covered up. It had been so completely romantic, but in the end what a fool he was... The girls didn't contribute a further

⁹ *They say there aren't any whores in Kolosvar
Don't they know shit about my woman?
Black hair, sky-blue eyes
God created her to fuck us great*

helping of blows. We aren't saying that he didn't perhaps get a couple of boots, but maybe not even that. The one who took care of the girls – to see a face as idiotic as his you would have to search for a long time – and another two heavies with him, picked Ivan up from the floor and showed him in no uncertain terms the way to the station. He went like a lamb: The ridiculous forms of belief.

*You threw away the keys to heaven
This Earth is not for you
shake off yourself of yourself,*

he kept repeating this in the same fashion as a devout votive candle seller might her rosary beads. As he creeps up the steps into the carriage, his legs are like par-boiled reeds. Automatically he makes for the toilet. The crapper, his most loyal friend. He had spent so much time there recently and now had time again to look it over. Could he sense already, how it might be of use to him?

The main thing is to open the window. With some types it is possible... fractionally possible... to dismantle...

We don't dare guess for what reason he has in his pocket a tiny, but firm screwdriver. It consists of two parts and, put together, they look like a silver pendent for keys. Even with that we would be positioning ourselves at the parameters of ugly rumours and cold conjecture. Let's be satisfied simply with this; that it now came in handy for him... if it hadn't already been useful before.

The train left the station and Ivan got down to work. He didn't merely want to hang himself nor jump out of a train. He had his fixed idea. Perhaps for him this technical complexity of a task which he had resolved to do would serve as a substitute for dignity. He was not intending to be either smeared across the rails or to piss himself, shit himself, nor ejaculate on the squalid shitter, dying slowly of asphyxiation. After all, considering his height, it would be practically impossible, in this small and stinking little hole, to manage to break his neck by his own weight alone.

He prepares the noose from a nylon shirt. Though new, it reeks detestably of the odour of recent experiences. Its impermeable, crease-resistant, untearable fabric was then a modern hit. The lone fact, that he probably only recently procured such a shirt – this single fact...

But as I have said, I really don't know.

With his head in the noose and heels in front, he forces himself from the window – it doesn't happen without some difficulty, even though his body is as thin as a fishing line. At the same time somebody starts energetically banging on the doors of the toilet..

I don't know whether he did or didn't start to panic. At this moment he had both legs outside of the train. The full weight of his beaten ribs is pressed against the rim of the window, hurting awfully. If you are proposing to die by suffocation, it is an absurd situation to be struggling to take in the critical breaths required to accomplish the task at hand. His hands flailing in the air, it is anybody's guess for what reason he is grabbing the plug.

The door suddenly opens inwards and smacks Ivan's suspended head with full force. As a result of the impact his body starts to shift and slide outside. The train is hurtling along. The good man, who almost killed him, demonstrates fantastic presence of mind by reaching in front of him and clutching. And he holds on.

Somebody started screaming and somebody else pulled the emergency brake. There was even a mention of it in the national newspapers.

4. INSANE LUCK

*Here I will be
and I will be still nearer
before the daybreak*

Lying around inside him is some kind of rhyming vegetable, whether it is his own or something foreign is of no consequence. The pills, which they give him to swallow here, empties the head, particularly the head which is desired to be emptied – and Ivan wishes for nothing else. The pills are slowing him down into whoppingly snail-like dimensions. He wipes away the saliva from the corners of his mouth with his index finger and stares at the stained finger tip and he cannot determine whether seconds, minutes or hours have elapsed before he wipes it on his tracksuit. Because the handkerchief in his pocket is too far away.

From the very beginning it was taken as given, that the others were substantially different to him, essentially alien. They had been connected by the external conditions: space, in which they were stuck; time, which was passing by; and the absurdity of the rules, whose demands they had to fulfill. Now, however, they are also disconnected from time: some are much faster than him, they walk and talk with a celerity that he doesn't even manage to follow, much less imitate. Some of them are in an even worse condition; his current neighbour at breakfast managed to gaze at his thumb tip until it had dried up and covered itself in a scarcely noticeable whitish crust... and after that came time for lunch.

Nobody here is alone even for a moment; as long as he is sick enough, it is of little consequence. Ivan, for that matter, is used to disengaging himself from people around him even without pills. Some had always remained unnoticed, they may well have been nasty pieces of work – but that was their thing and their pity. If he hadn't had so much experience in this discipline, his story could have been unfolding quite differently. If only he had listened a little...

Especially now that he had come across Siskin! Either this is his name, or simply how he is known. He is a wrinkled, mildly bloated, very tidy, manic-depressive little man, nearly fifty, nothing exceptional, one of the solidly running examples who are returning into the psychiatric institution like a bird into a nest. Amongst the physicians he is a favourite because his sickness runs to standard – which in this discipline is a pleasant exception, and furthermore, he is communicative, albeit sometimes a little too much so. He is homosexual and he has the manner of an old woman: he is repetitive. Anyone compelled to listen to him further soon gained the impression that he was dreaming up ideas in his voice-box. Should the utterances keep losing coherence, it is prone to be deemed verbal diarrhea. But no, it isn't so bad. Old Siskin merely likes to convey a monologue.

He has perhaps taken a liking to Ivan, him being new and all; and on top of that... well, maybe it is better not to probe too much.

“I got overheated, you know? I'm always getting overheated and then I should... well... ease up. But if I noticed that myself and sooner – that I'm going at such a high speed – hey, it would be too easy... It's oh so easy to advise everyone else in their affairs, but not one's own... it is suicide! I can see that you are bandaged... whatever it is that you thought up, show it off! You messed up, huh? Circular saw, was it? That's what I call a deadly weapon... Did you, by chance, want to cut yourself in two?”

Ivan has such heavy eyelids that he is unable to raise them, though he is trying to. The words badger him annoyingly like flies.

“Oh my, you have eyes like a cat! Sir, such eyes!” Siskin declares, half with shock and half with appreciation. “Ergh! To meet you in a cellar, I would hide in the coal, you can bet on that! How they sparkle, I'd scream right away... it isn't so common now to see such a thing... such eyes... blue, green, yellow... Can I just peek close up?”

Now that he is clownishly peering into his face. Ivan sees his prevalent widened pores close up. It takes ages, like in a slow dream.

“Piss off, you bastard.” Ivan forces the words out from himself gruffly, as if his throat had gone rusty. He hadn't used his vocal chords for a relatively long time. The last time – when was it? Where?

It had been in the small dive in Košice, a couple of streets from the station. Something of a similar nature had come out from him then too. It was as though the needle on the surface of a gramophone record had come across a speck, jumped and gone through the same groove twice.

Siskin steps back, as though he had unexpectedly trodden on a grass snake, and frowns offensively. But he doesn't stop speaking.

“I could tell you to kiss my arse, but it would put our relationship in danger... I'm not the type of person who fights fire with fire... nor am I any kind of loose cannon... And I would strongly recommend that you get on with me, that you treat me most respectfully. Because I was here when you were still suckling on your mother's teat. I know here what's what, and you don't have the foggiest idea, who here is a son of a bitch! You don't know who he is or where he is. I don't like it when people judge too quickly. I'm an altogether amicable person, and as long as I find myself in conditions like they are here, so be it, I can reconcile with this... I'll conciliate... it doesn't

matter. To measure up to the norm, young man... In this, that's the magic... then you are allowed to leave again..."

He is creating around Ivan a blizzard of noise. A dense mass, in which it could be possible to erect an igloo, and into which he will set foot and find himself in a vacuum. Should he awaken, that is. It isn't good at all to wake up, it is important not to wake up.

Only during the day he is not allowed to be lying. During the day one must be sitting in the communal area around a table. Ivan is sitting there, looking at his clasped hands. During the afternoon little building blocks are scattered on the table and they then separate them according to colour. Siskin is an expert in this. One, two – and the picture is completed. The problem is that there won't be any work left over for the others. Siskin is not the only one here who is speaking, there is no reason for Ivan to listen only to him.

"I have special talents, you see it don't you? At first sight you saw it! Not everyone has such abilities. I have talents to the extreme... exceptionally overpowering, and it's only thanks to these that I'm still here! Because I have the ability to connect the links! I can, so to speak, weave the lace! And I also know how to articulate it! Lace, this is it! When lace is unravelled, you are left with a handful of tangled-up thread. But I can find this lace with, you see? I can put it together backwards. I'll look at such a wretch who is cruel and of ill-fortune, and I see the design and intention of God, what in him didn't work out. And I go straight to the issue, and I get results! I have the ability to connect and reconcile. Ideally, everybody should know how to, but unfortunately only I do. This is the real horror of it! Because it is not the task of one to put right in people what is broken and make up something sensible from it, you know that? It calls for an organization, but which one, eh? You are permanently skating on thin ice, you glance around a couple of times and they lock you up for forbidden collaboration. I'm not such a lunatic!"

«So this is how a lunatic looks, I see,» Ivan says to himself with that part of the head which so very much doesn't want to be awake, «the main thing is to recognize and acknowledge it. I am crazy. I think in a simple way, as if I wrote in block letters...»

"I'm now placing hope in UNICEF. The children's fund! What would the UN be for? You know that they were awarded the Nobel prize? The world spins around children, only those who have them are not looking after them as they should, and those who would like to take care of them are not given them... so for that there is now UNICEF. I have, by chance, exact... very exact information. And I also have a plan. I can't simply spit out what ideas have come to me, they would put an end to it. They would fuck me up good and proper," says Siskin, and ruefully he smiles. Amid the stream of syllables there is a pause which awakens Ivan's attention. He raises his head slowly, as if he is carefully inserting it into the niche between walls. It feels big and heavy.

"It's about the child in us, I tell them, in every one of us a child is living and it must be protected. Nothing else is important, right? Those inner-children connect and reconcile in order for them not to judge... in order for them not to judge one another..."

«...and so it will be always, Jesus Christ!» runs through Ivan's mind in small italics. «And don't be asking brother JC for help, he has enough on his plate already. You are not among his top priorities,» comes additionally in capital letters into his head. There is no other option than to lower it, but it will take time, Ivan's personal time, which flows like honey. Whereas Siskin's runs quickly. He has a lead.

He catches Ivan's sight and he stares at him studiously.

"Those eyes, those eyes you have," he declares with new strength. "I've seen them before... almost identical... there are not many of that kind, and I have the power. I don't forget anything, even the slightest bit of nonsense... and this was important! When I speak about these children... who wouldn't want children? This one here would, and that one there would and I would as well, but this is, of course, between us. ...I'm not even allowed to, everyone would say to me, 'why don't you buy a dog, Mr Siskin?' Everyone says to me: 'Why not buy a dog?' ...and they think that they are being nice to me when they say it like this!"

By this time Ivan is no longer listening to him.

"I once knew someone who went to extremes to have a child. Really, he did so much for that, it was horrible. He was prepared to get married, like various people do – I wouldn't be able to bring myself to do that, I wouldn't have the stomach for it, but all sorts of people do – some stupid weasels think to themselves rather that they can do it easily... why not! Then they get into it without really knowing what it is that they are getting themselves into! But the man I knew was a decent person and polite and from a Moravian family, he couldn't do that to them..."

From this speech about what whoever could and couldn't do, from this torrent which is streaming and gurgling like a brook between marigolds, even I, the narrator, only after a while understood what it is all about. I shall interpret:

What Mr Siskin is spinning has a slightly confusing form, but factually speaking it has a head and heels. When Ivan's yellow catlike eyes were sparkling in front of him, something was brought to light within Siskin's memory, a story which was for him particularly prominent because it intersected in part with his, Ivan's own. The first time he had been admitted into an asylum had been more than twenty years ago. In the advanced stage of his mania he was brimming over with ideas of how to shake up and remodel the world and cajole people into

understanding...persuade them to shake hands and say everything to everybody...and once everybody spoke straight about everything, and they simply came to an agreement, no one would have any trouble, right? What then for the class fight and professional prejudice and class hatred?

He had met there with a fellow who listened to his nonsense with interest and who was – at least Siskin believed – taking him seriously. And as long as Siskin, with all his importunate questions, was at all willing to allow space for answers, he even responded.

“He was of the arty-farty type. He had graduated from a swanky school, all the students there were adept artists, but he was a sensible person. He said: I scratch into the linoleum, everything is about the craft – and I like that about him. He didn't have the pretense of an artist, he was from Hodonín, and he also had such a Moravian name... He was from a farm, but he wouldn't have stayed there, even if they hadn't confiscated his father's fields... into the cooperative, you know?”

Mr Siskin corrects himself hastily, so well-drilled in safety, that even here he is not to shoot his mouth off, during times of war or peace. The model lunatic is Mr Siskin, and Ivan would certainly have acknowledged that, had he been listening to him. But Ivan was only appearing to be. Patience, that is something that he is well-trained in. He doesn't hear, within his ribs he has an air-pump, and within that a vacuum.

*A functioning air-pump is when
a mouse dies within.
Does it hurt this mouse?*

“He was always going on that he had to get to the city. That he had to go far away, and this I also understand. It was wise of him and he couldn't have made it any other way because in the city there is the possibility that one's idiosyncrasies will not stand out. When a person there is different from others, they will perhaps let him live. But in the region around Hodonín, nothing can be hidden. Nothing...”

And here Mr Siskin whinnied like an endearing pony, because his illness had still not tipped over into the second phase and so all appeared to him lively and buoyant.

“I know something about this, I could have told him different tales to what he told me... I'm a wise person and I know what I can and can't do. And I also have my talents. But he was an absolute fool because he put into his head impossible things...”

What is it with time? Sometimes it sticks like custard, and sometimes it sets and hardens like old glue. It is stuck. Words run out. With this it is not expected that anything can be done.

In short, that which Mr Siskin slobbered about with a sort of pleading and hyper-persistence, was a obstinate nature. In the name of art he set out into the city, and there he discovered that he liked boys. And that giddiness of deep friendship, affection – mutual understanding – surrendering and co-being or whatever is dangerous and can cost you everything. Destructive, outrageous, unlawful, but nevertheless real. And with this he had to come to terms that he was in it alone. Or almost alone. Someone like this Mr Siskin – for example – he would perhaps have understood him. But then again he would perhaps have been repulsed by him. He understood that he had to take all of the traditional good family neighbourly and any other well-established opinion and pile it up and walk away from it. He was, it seemed, strong, brave and independent because he stood up to it. Had Ivan been listening, he would have heard a song about a hero.

“And he – as it was after the occupation; peace, end of war, sunshine, marigolds radiating by the creek and all that jazz – I wonder if you know that those golden sweethearts are called greasy dumplings, huh, kiddo? You don't know, so look. People were returning from the labour camps battered and empty-eyed, and it triggered a crazy idea in his mind. He was drunk on the euphoria of freedom. So many people horribly dead and he decides that he wants to have a son. He said at the time a child – that he wanted to have a child – but it is obvious that he wanted a boy. What would he do with a girl?”

Mr Siskin lays down this rhetorical question and his eyes blaze. For what reason was he so interested in this?

“I didn't understand very much what he was thinking about it. Neither do I have any idea how, in the end, he managed it. As I said, he found some old hag, and he came to some kind of agreement with her. Really, I don't know how it was with her. Anyway, he knocked her up. He managed it... I wouldn't have been able to...” Mr Siskin shudders with distaste. “And then I don't know how it was with her... if she was playing games with him or what. Well, that's women. She wanted him to marry her – so that his parents would be pleased! And that was something he didn't want for love or money. Who knows what she would've been like in the end, if she would have been such a pleasure – well, she certainly wasn't! It was a cock-up, everybody would confirm that. Do you think that these cases are rare? Well, he was perhaps principled. And therefore he ticked her off?”

Siskin queries the world with embittered curiosity. It has been so many years and the rebellious manic power in him still cannot sleep.

“She gave birth, the cow. She gave birth to a boy and then she knocked down the ladder from under this poor fellow, the bitch. She was one fucking bitch...”

A hop and a skip across the next forty minutes: Mother, despite sacred promises, put the child up for

adoption and about its father she recounted, on this occasion, plenty of things, some of them indictable. Then her tracks vanish.

“He wanted the child, he wanted the boy, his son. He claimed responsibility for him immediately. Powder milk had been invented, so what was the problem? Why couldn't a guy look after a child? But they wiped the floor with him. He told them something, and well, it seemed so hideous to them that soon he was being led away in handcuffs... He served his time, and he was so mournful from this. Like a tortoise he was... but it was silly that he could be so sad about it. When he came here, he surely had good fortune... People usually don't appreciate their bread and butter. Here there isn't any happiness, apart from mine. But I, thank god, have my special abilities, which not everybody has... But they broke something inside him. I sensed it... but I couldn't leave it. I told him: broken is only broken, *Doseděl*. I know it snapped, but don't worry. Believe me, every broken bone will at some point heal up...”

Now even the man's name is shooting out from him. But Ivan, honest to god, completely misses it.

“He was so terribly handy, you know? He was able to do such things with a pencil that even Rembrandt would wince. He drew all the time, you know? That is something I still didn't tell you. He had a steady hand, he could draw lines in tiny minute *detail*...” Mr Siskin articulates the last word slowly and clearly; he likes the sound of it, it is nice, fitting and resonates. He himself laughs flatteredly and leans closely over to Ivan:

“I liked him. I'll say it openly. This I don't have to hide. I loved him, he was my every joy, my pleasure. Every time they brought me here, I looked forward to finding him here again...”

Ivan has an uncertain and uncomfortable feeling that Siskin is spluttering into his face.

“And then he vanished. Nothing. He wasn't here. It's pointless to ask – nobody will ever tell you anything here...”