

THE
CHOICE

JAKUB TRPIŠ

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2018

A minimalist, monochromatic image. At the top, a bright sun is partially obscured by a dark horizon line. Below this, a large, faint, glowing sphere, resembling a planet or moon, is visible. The text is centered on the image.

Imagine
the future.

Now imagine
the future is an illusion.

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Prayer of the soul

*Close your eyes. Stop perceiving the noise around,
And focus within.*

*Breathe in deep and slowly breathe out,
Like the ocean's ebb and flow.
Perceive the vast oceans within.*

*Breathe in deep and slowly breathe out,
Like the wind rustling in the leaves.
Perceive the great mountains within.*

*Breathe in deep and slowly breathe out,
Like the sun's aureola.
Perceive the endless universe.*

*Perceive the beauty here and now.
Savour this present moment.*

Part one:

1/1 The car accident

It came like a bolt from the blue. Quickly donning his jacket, Tomáš could think of only one thing: If I'd guessed I'd be seeing Eliška for the last time this morning, I wouldn't have said good-bye that way at all. He hurried to the door and told the doorman what had happened.

'My wife has been in an accident! I have to get to the hospital.'

Though he was trying to get a grip on his feelings, tears welled up in his eyes. He couldn't find his staff card to open the door, but after an embarrassing silence that lasted some time

the doorman let him through. Tomáš managed to thank the doorman, who called out after him sympathetically.

‘It’ll turn out all right, you’ll see!’

Outside it was raining. He turned up the collar of his brown leather jacket to at least cover up his bare neck a little. The small, cold droplets fell quietly on the chill earth.

‘Brrr, thank goodness I came to work in my car today. Otherwise I’d have to call a taxi,’ he muttered as he rummaged for his keys in his pocket. He dropped them a couple of times before he managed to unlock the door. He couldn’t recall how he got into the car, and he didn’t regain his presence of mind until he’d been driving for several minutes.

That was a mistake. Better keep my eyes on the road now, he thought. He tried to focus all his attention on his driving, but various memories kept getting the better of him. He recalled the day they had got to know each other, and another thought took him back to the home where he had grown up. It was a cold day like today, and he introduced her to his parents. She kept checking to make sure she was doing the right thing – she was really nervous.

‘Do you think they’re going to like me?’ she asked when they were on their own.

He just smiled and answered, ‘Definitely not as much as I do.’

He was half-way to the hospital when he stopped at a crossing for a red light. The rain pitter-pattered on the metal roof – and from time to time the wipers creaked lazily across the windscreen. Trickle of water streaked seamlessly across the side window, each droplet going its own way, regardless of the others. Or were they complying with some precise preordained plan? His attention shifted from the droplets to the people crossing in front of him. Their expressions were vacant, as if their bodies were on autopilot, and their minds were somewhere else

entirely. When he saw two lovers he paradoxically recalled the day he had confided to her that he wasn't sure if he still loved her. If he'd only known what pain he would cause, he would never have let those words pass his lips. It flashed through his mind that he had to tell her what he felt about her and how much she mattered to him. This thought was rapidly overshadowed by all the others. His body filled with an unusually strong urge to tell her everything. His heart beat twice as fast. He was startled by a car hooting behind him: the lights were on green and he was standing at the crossroads holding up the traffic.

When he had spoken to a hospital nurse on the phone she didn't tell him what had happened. He didn't know how seriously his wife had been injured, or if her life was in danger. The uncertainty was the worst he had ever felt in his life. He wanted to immediately be with her and feel she was safe. It took him some time to find his bearings in the hospital complex. At the emergency reception he told the nearest nurse his wife's name.

'I'll just ring my colleagues. Just take a seat for a moment please,' she quietly said, disappearing through a nearby door. The section was full of people, but nobody took any notice of the distraught Tomáš, who was so on edge that he couldn't even sit down. Is she all right? Or are the doctors fighting for her life at this very moment? Or perhaps...?! These thoughts kept going round in his head, as his mind taunted him with the darkest scenarios. Then it seemed to calm down and show him some far more optimistic possibilities. Perhaps they had just taken her to hospital for an examination, or maybe she just had concussion, he mused, letting his thoughts run their course. On the one hand he felt agitated and confused, while on the other he felt a sense of resignation. Eventually a senior nurse came up and asked him his name.

'Come with me, Mr Jedlička,' she said, heading towards a dimly lit corridor to the right. He followed her into a small,

bright room that clearly served as a doctors' office. A thickset, gray-haired doctor was sitting at a computer. Next to the monitor there was a photograph of a woman holding a small boy in her arms (they looked very happy). When the doctor noticed how distraught he was, he immediately put him at his ease.

'Don't worry. Your wife is going to be fine.'

His eyes moistened and he felt an enormous sense of joy. Suddenly he felt several years younger.

The doctor continued, 'Your wife has had a severe shock, but fortunately there are no signs of any serious injury. Just to be certain we are going to perform some more tests on her to make sure she doesn't have any internal injuries. We're going to keep her in for another couple of days. You can see her if you want. She's in Ward C. Blanka here will tell you which room.'

Tomáš offered his hand and stammered, 'Thank you very much.'

The doctor just smiled and walked into a side room, where his colleagues were evidently going over a diagnosis.

Tomáš asked Nurse Blanka how to get to Ward C and headed off for it at a swift pace. On the way he could not help but notice the unhappy scenes that were taking place in one of the waiting rooms. A young doctor was telling relatives that their loved one had died. A fair-haired woman went into hysterics, while the man nearby tried to comfort her, without much success. At this moment Tomáš realized just how awfully fortunate he had been. Suddenly it was of no importance that there was a leak behind the chimney flue, that he had not received a bonus at work and that he had problems with his car. He walked through the door into Ward C and asked a nurse where he could find Eliška Jedličková.

'Room 7,' the tall young blonde answered, smiling at him as she continued to pass out medicine. He practically ran to get to Eliška as quickly as possible. So agitated was he that he did not

even knock on the door. Before he managed to reach her she had sat up in bed. They embraced, and it felt like the most beautiful feeling in the world.

She burst out crying and blurted out, 'I didn't see it. That car. There were children inside.' And she began to sob again. He stroked her hair.

'It'll be all right, Eli. They'll be okay, you'll see.'

They kept hugging for a while without saying a word. After some time Eliška spoke.

'Karolína at work was supposed to come with me, but she was late and didn't answer my phone call, so I left on my own. When I eventually drove out, everything seemed okay.'

She then confusedly described the crossroads (while attempting to gesture, even though she could barely move her arms) where the collision happened. She should have given way, but she only spotted the other car at the last moment. At length she uttered:

'It hit me from the right. I don't know what would have happened if somebody had been sitting beside me.'

Tomáš listened to all this. It was extremely fortunate that Karolína had not gone with her that day. Then he told her everything he had been thinking about in the car.

'I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you.'

'Just don't think about that, dear,' she answered, stroking his unshaven cheek. She loved the way he always put on a face when she did that. Then they carried on talking and talking. About important matters and silly things. They had not had such a good chat for a long time. Eventually a nurse appeared at the door with lunch, stating with a gruff expression:

'Your wife must get some rest. You should be on your way now.' She pointed at her watch. He kissed Eliška goodbye and disappeared through the doorway.

The next few days were of no great interest. It rained non-stop outside. Tomáš's family and friends often asked him about Eliška, who was released from hospital two days later. The passengers from the other car were also all right. Perhaps it was because of the accident that they both decided to take off for the mountains that weekend. They were able to spend three days at their best friend Ondra's chalet. Ondra always had a strange sense of humour. When he saw Tomáš's wife (with the scar healing on her forehead) he immediately started ribbing her:

'Why do you give us such worries, Eliška? Didn't you see the car or something?' and he started laughing. Tomáš now found this quite amusing.

On the Friday they headed off for the Jeseník Mountains. The chalet was quite high up with no road leading to it, so they parked the car in a parking lot below and they had to keep going on foot for another two hours.

Several rained-off days later the sky was cloudless, and it grew warmer. Having walked for about five minutes they met a young woman with an Alsatian dog running free without a muzzle.

'Don't be afraid, she's never bitten anyone,' her mistress smiled proudly.

'The fact she has never done it before doesn't mean I won't be the first,' Tomáš retorted, smiling to cover up his fear.

They walked deeper and deeper into the forest. Not a living soul to be seen. The further they got from civilization, the better Tomáš felt. The trees around them seemed to light up. He left the path a little when he saw a young fir tree some three metres tall. The ends of its branches had beautiful green needles. This year's growth, he thought, pulling one of the branches to his

face. It had a magnificent smell, reminding him of his youth. He had spent a lot of time with his grandfather in the mountains.

He was naive in those days and thought he could change the world. He wanted to visit every single mountain, as well as places that were not even on the map. To be the first where no one had gone before. As he thought of his carefree childhood, he remembered the children he taught at school. He suddenly regretted the fact that he always removed their rose-tinted spectacles whenever they described what they wanted to be when they grew up. If I didn't do it then somebody else most certainly would, he had tried telling himself. Somebody has to tell them how the world works. He looked at the trees again, but now they just looked ordinary again. One more time he sniffed the young fir and set off at a rapid pace along the path after Eliška. By the time they arrived back at the chalet the sun had already set behind the ridge and the air had grown chilly. Everywhere peace and quiet. The orange glow on the horizon gradually faded into grey and a frosty autumn night settled over the mountains.

When they opened the creaking door they first checked to see how clean and tidy it all was.

'We mustn't leave it any untidier than we first found it,' she smiled.

'It's not that bad,' he decided, having gone over the chest of drawers opposite the fireplace with his finger, while flashing his usual little-boy smile. He lit a fire in the fireplace, while Eliška prepared a modest supper.

'Tomorrow we can go up to the lookout tower. What do you think?' he suggested.

'Do I have a choice?'

'Ah, you and your fear of heights,' he smiled slyly.

'Ah, you and your fear of dogs,' she retorted.

Tomáš rather enjoyed the evening. They reminisced about various incidents from the past.

‘And do you remember what your father said when you brought me home?’ she asked him.

‘How could I forget? He yelled, “Thank God. I thought you were gay!” Then he fell on his knees and gave you a hug.’ They both burst out laughing.

‘It was only later that I understood your dad’s really weird sense of humour.’

‘Just like you have got used to mine,’ and he stuck his finger up her nose.

‘Hey,’ Eliška laughed, as she defended herself. ‘You are a dummy.’

But then she grew serious and her voice quivered. ‘Whenever I close my eyes I see shards of glass flying everywhere, and my ears are shattered by the grating metal sound of those cars. I can’t get the noise out of my head.’

He stroked her chestnut hair and embraced her, placing her head on his chest. The beating of his heart soothed her, and she soon felt safe. Her memory of the crash slowly dissolved, like ice thawing in spring sunshine.

Outside it was really cold and dark. The windows had misted up. The wood in the fireplace crackled as it gave off a pleasant warmth. The fire lit up the cosy room’s walls with its hand-painted pictures of chalets and log cabins, which had hung there for over a century (each painting was dated). They chatted for a while and then made love. Over the last year their sexual life had not been all that passionate. They had tried to conceive. Recently his doctor had told him the worst: he couldn’t have his own children. Perhaps that was why over the last few months their relationship had cooled. Perhaps that was why they didn’t enjoy sex that much. They had tried so hard for a pregnancy that they’d forgotten what fun sex could be.

A thought passed through Tomáš's mind as he fell asleep: It wasn't that bad at all today.

1/2 Awakening

Tomáš awoke to a chilly morning. It was still dark. The lights in the shelter did not turn on until seven o' clock, enabling him to at least tell if it was daytime or not. A strange smell wafted through the air, stinging his eyes. Like every morning he 'made himself' a glass of water, pouring it from a jerrycan into a little cup with an engaging faded kitsch picture of a dog on it, and tossed a chlorine tablet into it. It didn't go down very well, but he had become quite used to the peculiar taste, and it always made him think of the taste of clean drinking water. Of course, he was still a lot better off than on the surface, or even in an adaptation camp. Thousands of people that had been caught and successfully identified by the police and the army were taken off there every day. The civil war had been raging throughout Europe, and he had lost sight of who was fighting whom. He put his feet on the rough floor and shivered. It was cold and damp. He quickly put his shoes on and stood up.

He noticed his neighbour was not lying on his bed. It took him a while to realize he had perished in a roof-fall a couple of days earlier.

He walked out of a medium-sized dormitory, where some twenty of them were sleeping, and headed down a dark corridor towards the showers. The walls were dirty and wet. The hum of a giant ventilator pumping fresh air from the surface down to this part of the complex echoed along the empty corridor. It once used to be the underground Metro. During the war the underground tunnels had been used as shelters for hundreds of thousands of people. The fighting had rampaged all over the world. Dozens of atom bombs had fallen on China, the USA and Japan, while a new kind of virus, probably a biological weapon, raged across Africa. Europe had been ravaged by civil war, while

Asia had seen a once-in-a-millennium famine and the continual waves of refugees could barely be contained in Australia, which as the only country that maintained neutral status was now struggling with huge overpopulation and pirate raids.

Nobody could now remember when the war had started. Nobody was sure which side this nation or that was on. Some countries changed sides during the conflict as often as their governments were replaced by various insurgent factions. People worldwide were plagued by fear and mistrust. Nobody could be sure if the next faction to seize power would find them inconvenient. The Czech Republic was now in a tug of war between movements made up of military personnel from Russia before its collapse.

People stopped saying what they thought and started parroting the opinions of those in power. Too many of their relatives had disappeared after they tried to change things. Tomáš's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a scream. Perhaps someone has been robbed again, he thought. Eventually he got to the showers. The queue was shorter than usual, so it was soon his turn. Alas a five-minute shower a week barely patched up his ailing, languishing body, and he took care in the shower not to touch anything much with his bare skin, as various skin diseases were rife throughout the shelter. After showering, he went off to the canteen for breakfast. He bent over the dirty, greasy hatch and muttered between clenched teeth: 'Thirty-four.' Of all the meals served there, this one was at least edible, even if it bore about as much resemblance to ordinary food as chess did to other sports. As he ate he looked around. Everyone was staring at their own plate in silence.

Again he became absorbed in his thoughts. It might well have been awful in the shelter, but he was still very lucky. He was a healthy man with a decent background and an outstanding teacher. They had found him a job at the central shelter.

Originally it was the Prague Metro, but that had stopped running soon after the first bombing raids had become a regular part of life. His job was now to teach the children of the leading politicians (that is, the ones currently in power) at a local school. He glanced at his scuffed old watch, gulped down a last mouthful and hurried off to his lessons.

The children in his class wore careworn, grown-up expressions. They should have been enjoying a carefree childhood, but they barely smiled and only spoke among themselves when it was really necessary. One little girl in a blue dress looked at him differently. When he looked her over he noticed bruises on her hand, while her face was greasy and almost expressionless. She looked like a doll that had been thrown into the gutter years ago. He often had to give her a shake to bring her round. Apart from teaching the children he also had the task of providing his biological material for selected women. Here his thoughts returned to Eliška. She should have been in the shelter with him, but something had gone wrong. The transport hadn't made it. Now she was almost certainly dead. He bowed his head and started to pound his forehead with his fist. Two children on the first row raised their heads for a moment, but then got back to their copying work.

Tomáš lost all hope when he found out about his wife's death. He would never forget that day. Everywhere was dark, dank and terribly cold. The frost and despair crept into the marrow of his bones, as if iced water were being pumped into his veins. There was nothing on earth to console him. He used the last of his money to buy adulterated alcohol and a rope, but at the last moment he was rescued. Nobody said anything to him. Suicides were frequent here. No one wanted to live like a rat underground. Nobody wanted a life without hope any more. The world had become a dark place. This darkness could be felt at every step and could be seen in the eyes of everybody he looked at. The

little girl in the blue dress, who he had just been watching, stood up from her desk. Her pitiful, greasy face leant over his shoulder so she could whisper to him:

‘The darkness is drawing in. The world will die, because you have stopped fighting for it. The world will be consumed in fire!’

‘What darkness? What are you talking about?’ he cried in horror. He woke up with these feelings and thoughts. It was all just a dream!

He tried to catch his breath, but with the same sense of despair as in the dream. He pressed his head to his knees, as tears ran down his cheeks. His heart thumped as if his life were in danger. He must have awoken Eliška too, as she began to stroke his sweat-soaked back: ‘It was only a dream, dear. It’s alright now.’

‘Uh-oh. I thought those dreams were over.’

1/3 Problems

The weekend in the mountains was a pleasant interlude, but now he had to get back to the everyday routine of loan repayments, arguments with colleagues and giving his pupils a good talking to. Still, things were a little simpler now. On the Monday he was teaching until late in the afternoon. During the day his colleagues often asked him how Eliška was getting on after the accident. He always answered smilingly that everything was now just fine.

After lunch, which was not up to much, he could look forward to a civic studies lesson with 4A, his favourite class. One way or another they got round to a discussion on helping other people. One girl told a story about her cousin Jakub. He was twenty-five years old, in and out of work, expecting a child with his girlfriend and now they were deep in debt.

‘Auntie and Uncle don’t have much money themselves, and if anything their situation’s getting worse. Who knows what they’re going to do now?’ she added.

‘I’d leave them right in it,’ Robert, the class smart-guy, smugly declared.

Lenka, the local hippy, snapped, ‘You’ve always been clueless.’

Tomáš often gave his pupils some leeway for an exchange of views, which was another reason why most of the class naturally held him in great respect.

‘What would you advise Jakub to do?’ he asked, inviting them to engage in open discussion.

‘Jakub’s girlfriend should get an abortion,’ said Lukáš, Robert’s best friend.

Then Beáta floored him: ‘You’ll probably never get a bloody girlfriend,’ and she added in a calm voice: ‘I think they should

go round all the banks and explain their situation. The banks would definitely agree to reduce the instalments.'

Dominik, Tomáš's favourite, joined in the discussion: 'Banks are only interested in profit. The women behind the counter will smile at you to persuade you that you need a loan, but when you go and tell them you can't pay it back they won't help you.'

'You're right, Dominik. You can't usually negotiate a reduction in payments, even though the banks' attitudes towards this have been changing in recent times. What would you recommend for Jakub?'

'The banks' attitudes are changing, because the banks realize it's better to get less money back from the clients than no money at all, so they're willing to come to an agreement. Jakub should ask his parents if he can move back in with them for a while. Then he could use the money he would otherwise have paid in rent to pay back his debts.'

Robert and Lukáš started laughing out loud at this, and Robert commented, 'Smartass, they'll be glad to get rid of a failure of a son like that.'

At this point the calm class debate turned into a pub brawl, as some five pupils started shouting at each other (while Lenka banged her textbook on the desk) and of course none of them could be heard. Tomáš looked sternly at Robert and Lukáš.

'Your parents must be really proud of you. Come out to the blackboard, both of you. I'll cut you down to size! The discussion's over, thanks to these two.'

The room resounded with a murmur of disapproval, more because the discussion was over than because the class smart-guys were being tested.

The test ended as expected. Robert got a bottom mark and Lukáš not much better, 'since you did at least try, Lukáš,' Tomáš explained.

The rest of the day's lessons were by no means ideal. He was supposed to go over the increasing incidence of bullying at school with the first formers, but they did not want to go along with this at all, and if anything actually defended bullying. Tomáš completely lost control of the discussion. The headmistress had warned him the previous time that if the situation did not improve between him and the class then another teacher would take over.

'Phew,' he came out of the class, exhausted. The corridor was empty and cold, with the same pictures hanging on the walls for years. Now he was feeling old and forlorn. Several pupils walked past and greeted him, but he only managed to grimace back. He then headed off to the staff room, where a weekly meeting was taking place. On the way he reconsidered Robert and Lukáš's test. Perhaps I was a little harsh on them, he thought.

The meeting was really seething. The school was having financial difficulties, and Honza was explaining why the grammar school was getting less money from the local authority than they had anticipated. Tomáš joined in the argument by responding to the idea that the local council could be given a fright by warning them that pupil numbers might be reduced: 'We can't just blackmail the council like that.'

'You've always been soft, sunshine. I can see you've never been in the army,' Karel challenged him, and Tomáš suddenly realized just how much he couldn't stand him. He only needed to bump into him in the corridor and his mood was immediately ruined. And now he was putting Tomáš down in front of his colleagues. Instantly he counterattacked: 'You're so henpecked you have to make up for it here at school!'

Karel was taking a deep breath to deliver the final death blow when he was stopped short by Jindřiška.

'Now, now, gentlemen,' she said with the calm and experience of many long years as headmistress. 'You won't resolve

the issue that way. We have to be united. I suggest we meet up with the mayor to explain the situation to him. We can tell him that pupil numbers may be reduced, because that's the way it is. There's nothing else we can make savings on. Honza is well in there, so he can go over it all with him. But he is definitely not going to blackmail anybody,' and with these words she looked sternly at Karel.

The meeting came to an end, so Karel came to wind up what he had started: 'We haven't finished yet, mummy's little pet.'

Tomáš wanted to respond somehow, but he couldn't manage any more than 'Sure'. The incident had robbed him of the last vestiges of his good mood.

On the way home he got wet. Apart from his damp socks he was beset by other problems that had been bothering him for some time. All afternoon and evening, in fact, he was weighed down with debilitating thoughts: debt repayments, hatred of Karel, his bad nutritional habits and other issues. What was more, he felt worse and worse physically.

He was irritable because he had to smile at everyone and act as if he were doing just fine. He was distraught, but couldn't tell anybody. Everybody wanted something from him, but he couldn't please everybody. He felt like a student at college. Every teacher thinks his subject is the most important, but these weren't teachers, these were his family, friends and colleagues.

He had the feeling that somewhere along the way he had lost an important part of himself, but he couldn't remember where and what it was. Then his thoughts started revolving around his nightmares. His throat dried up and he had to sit down. The very thought of them almost paralysed him. Eliška was not at home, so he felt all alone. The ticking of the wall clock was the most interesting thing in the apartment and indeed in his entire life. He went off to the local for a beer. When he

came back home late in the evening she was already asleep. As he lay down beside her, he no longer had any doubts...

The feeling he had been fighting for so long, which had vanished after the car accident, had come back. He was lying beside his wife, and yet he felt so enormously remote from her. No matter how hard he tried, he could not get rid of the feeling. He felt like he was in his dream. Everywhere it was dark, dank and horribly cold. His bones and joints started to ache. A part of him had died. And then a little later it died again. This repeated death, return of hope and then death again was wearing him down. Depression engulfed his entire body. Thousands of thoughts raced through his mind. He couldn't remember when it happened. When he stopped loving her. The girl he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. That feeling of love following the car accident was only a side effect that covered up his problems for a while. Now he was forcing himself to love her like he used to. He didn't want to break her heart, as he had once long ago promised himself never to hurt her.

It had been going on all that year. He hadn't said anything to her. He had tried to once, but it didn't work out. Eliška guessed it when a month previously she'd asked him if he loved her. He hadn't been able to answer her properly then. She was fretting over him, but then she was pretending nothing was the matter just like he was. They were playing a game of happy couples, so that nobody around them ever found out it was all over. Eventually he had realized. He didn't want to hurt her, so they were acting out a performance of Look Everyone! The Happiest Couple in the World. Except the charade was actually hurting her far more.

The entire truth weighed down heavily upon him, pressing on his chest like an enormous boulder. He had betrayed her. He had betrayed himself. She would be a lot better off on her own than with a husband who didn't love her. Three months

before that he was actually thinking of being unfaithful, and it was only his principles that had prevented him. He had finally understood that it was better to live alone than to live in a relationship that didn't work. But he didn't have the strength to change it.

Tomáš was now entirely engulfed by a feeling of total emptiness, self-betrayal, alienation and sadness. Financial problems at school, dreams of despair and his total torment regarding his wife meant that everything he thought of upset him. When he was twenty he'd always thought that by this time he'd have a well-paid job which he would enjoy. He imagined a wife he would love above all else, and marvellous children. Instead he was deep in debt with a tiny apartment and a relationship that was falling apart. He no longer enjoyed his work. And he had failed as a man since he hadn't managed to give his wife a child.

I'm thirty-two, I've achieved nothing in life and I hate myself, he concluded.

He felt like disappearing. He wanted to jump out of bed and get away somewhere. Anywhere. Just away from there. Away from that screwed-up life with nothing to grasp hold of and nothing to support him. It was over! The final performance. He no longer even had the strength to be annoyed.

I might just be better off if I don't wake up tomorrow, he thought as he fell asleep. It was dark, dank and horribly cold all around.