
CLASSICS
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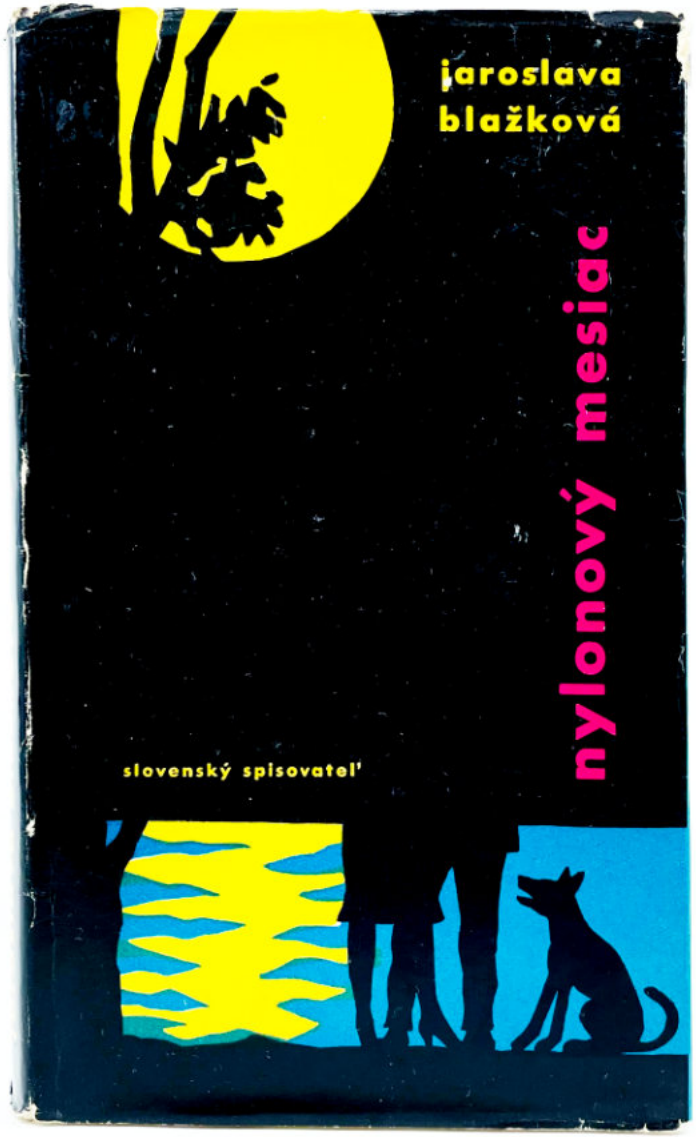
LITERATURE

JAROSLAVA BLAŽKOVÁ

Nylon Moon



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Blažková's unconventional heroine, insisting on "freedom of choice" in her sex life, represented a remarkable step forward in what used to be called the "emancipation" of fictional heroines. The revolt of young heroines against the conventions of the uptight early 1960s was the central theme of Blažková's books.

The thirty-year-old attractive architect Andrej is facing a choice between two women. He rejects boredom in the form of a reliable but unattractive nurse Drahuša and decides to play with fire, represented by her colleague Vanda. In this relationship, he loses the dominant position to which he is accustomed in relation to his partners, as well as his unconventional views on the futility of marriage. The young couple spend their time sitting in cafés and wandering around old Petržalka on the banks of the Danube. Through spending time with Vanda, Andrej changes his free-thinking attitudes and leans towards a more traditional understanding of a relationship. However, the spontaneous Vanda who enjoys life to the full and lives in the moment, begins to feel her freedom slowly disappearing whenever she is with Andrej. His excessive infatuation, care and efforts to own her and settle down arouse in her a desire for freedom, a loss of excitement and ultimate indifference.

Jaroslava Blažková (1933 – 2017)

Despite living most of her life as an emigrant in Canada, Blažková is still considered one of the most important Slovak authors of the 20th century. In 1956 she was dismissed from the editorial staff of Smena newspaper for political reasons. At that time she was banned from publishing her work, but after 1958, with the arrival of a political "thaw", the embargo was lifted. In the early sixties she was one of the most important authors at Mladá Tvorba (Young Writing), a magazine which at the end of the 1950s opened up space for the young literary generation. In 1968, after the occupation of Czechoslovakia, she emigrated to Canada and her family settled in Toronto, where she worked for the well-known exile publishing house of Josef Škvorecký, 68 Publishers. After 1989 her books started to appear again in Slovakia. Her work brought the long-taboo topic of women's emancipation and an urban lifestyle into the literary world and thus established her as a groundbreaking author in Slovak literature. Jaroslava Blažková was also founder of a new stream of fairy tale narratives in Slovakia.

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It felt damp and funereal at the cemetery. Shrivelled chrysanthemums hung down in thefog and the gravedigger's young son was huddled above the flame of an All Saints candle. A can that he pulled along on a ropewas his horse or car. He paid no attention to the dark coats outside the chapel. The coats shuffled about and heard the jangling of the can-cum-horse, making an effort to look mournful.

Andrej felt uneasy. It seemed ridiculous to be standing among the assembled dark winter coats, forcing a funereal grimace onto his face. He had never liked Vdovjak and the fact that he was now dead altered nothing. The priest kept them waiting.

Paštinský rubbed his hands to keep warm:

"What a tragedy, what a tragedy," he repeated for the hundred-and-fiftieth time. Originality had never been his forte. His broad face reflected his dread of the day when he, too,Vinco Paštinský...

Andrej was amused that he could read his colleague's face like a book. Paštinský looked frightened in the morgue where Vdovjak was laid out with his pasty, lemony face. It was not inappropriate to be scared of a corpse, particularly one which used to be Vdovjak when he was alive. Almost everyone at the institute was scared of Vdovjak. Of his position, his sarcasm, and his magisterial demeanour, which owed more to poor digestion

than to any expertise. As they stood around the bier, everyone felt an unease quite similar to that during their regular Monday meetings. In addition, Paštinský's face betrayed a fear that Vdovjak might suddenly sit up and turn on him with withering irony:

"So I can expect your monthly report as a Christmas gift, can I?"

But with Vdovjak safely gone, Paštinský's anxiety morphed into philosophy:

"Wherever are you now? Where?" His lament ended in an enormous question mark.

The coffin was ornate, with carved apples and lace paper. Andrej relished the fact that Vdovjak,the great proponent of functionalism in architecture and the arch-enemy of kitsch, had ended up in this frilly coffin, with incense from wax candles in art nouveau candlesticks wafting towards his nose. His plump wife Helena, representing the grieving family, wailed like a tragic ham actor in a bad play:

"Oh Sweetie, my Sweetie!"

It went well with the bright-coloured baubles, the crepe paper roses, and the cheap tinkle of the death knell.

Quite a dignified end to a life.

Pallbearers in faded uniforms burst into the morgue and slammed the lid down on Vdovjak in a well-practised routine.

Helena gasped but they pushed her aside and hammered the nails down as nimbly as woodpeckers.

"Come on now," Paštinský said as he dragged Andrej away. "I can feel it in the pit of my stomach. First those nails intothe coffin and then the sodsof earth falling on the lid. I can't stand it."

"Can we all go home now?" asked Andrej, lighting up.

"Are you crazy? He'll be taken to the chapel. There'll be a service with a priest."

"A priest?"

"At the insistence of the mother of the deceased."

He sounded almost relieved as he uttered the word

"deceased". They walked around the graves through slippery black mud.

Paštinský sighed:

"We're all headed that way..."

The priest still didn't come.

Everyone was chilled to the bone and fed up.

The undertakers grumbled impatiently: they had three more funerals to do and they weren't being paid for hanging around. Andrej wondered if they, too, had quotas to meet.

Finally, the priest arrived, surly and out of breath. He removed his winter coat and threw it to the altar boy. The gilding on his cope was scuffed. His props are fading, Andrej thought.

The priest jabbered requiem aeternam, Helena resumed her wailing, and the employees of the Institute of Architecture stood around, hats in hand, visibly bored. The altar boy, leaning casually on the portable cross, rubbed the trainer he was wearing on his right foot against his left, watching the gravedigger's son with interest.

"Come over here," he gestured, but the boy yanked the rope, stuck his tongue out and ran towards the exit. The can rattled into the circumdederunt.

Andrej turned around and decided he would ring Draha as soon as he was out of the cemetery. Almost at the same moment he noticed the Redhead.

He recognised her instantly. He turned around to look again at her face, almost indecently radiant and full of colour amid the dark of the coats and graves. The first time he had seen her she had also given the impression of being bright and colourful. It was at the annual conference. He remembered the day well. He had arrived early by mistake and the meeting room was still empty. Shiny red carpets on the floor, lamps with baroque shades on the walls in anotherwise modern hotel. It had been built at a time when everything ancient was regarded as refined, giving rise to bizarre fusions of plastic with heavy plush and wreaths of plaster. A crystal chandelier was suspended above the room, heavy with the ghosts of past meetings and intangible

fatigue. A waiter was fastidiously lining up bottles of mineral water and two clerks were counting luncheon vouchers at a table by the door.

One of them was known as Squirrel. She had a toothy smile and an air of vulnerability that men found flattering. Andrew knew her. They had been together two or three times, always after some office party when he didn't feel like going home or anywhere else. Her place was very conveniently in the city centre. All in all, everything about her was very convenient. She had a room with its own entrance and bathroom, constant hot water, and good coffee. He could take a bath in the morning and the only trace the girl would leave was a feeling of pleasant freshness.

"Good morning, Andrej," she called. "Welcome to the conference."

"Good morning, Squirrel baby."

He took care to look for a seat that gave him a good view of the room without being seen himself. He found one in a corner by the window, but his efforts came to nought. Peter turned up, lured him away for a cup of coffee, and by the time they came back the first speaker was already solemnly clearing his throat. The room had filled up. The only empty seats were right under the speakers' table; as they walked down the hall everyone eyed them uplike at a parade. They were familiar with the paper; they had all contributed to it. Peter was doodling piglets with disproportionately long, curly tails, while Andrej indulged in some private psychological observations. He concluded that ninety percent of those present were of a melancholy disposition. Then he spotted the Redhead. She was in the seat he had picked for himself. She didn't appear to be of a melancholy disposition. She listened intently, almost eagerly, betraying her youthfulness. Since she was too far away, he took her beauty with a pinch of salt. Her skin was white but warm, absorbing the light, and her copper hair shone bright, giving off sparks. For some reason she reminded him of the sea. She turned to face him as if sensing he was watching herand held his gaze. Only when the speaker moved on

to the next part of his talk did she return to her papers. She was taking notes in a large notebook, which made Andrej feel as if they were at a university lecture. He poked Peter in the ribs.

"Gorgeous. But not my type. A sunbird."

"What?"

"A sunbird. Something exotic. Women like that can easily burn you."

Andrej laughed.

In the break he discovered that she worked at the department of agriculture. Marcina from the ministry agreed to introduce them. They shook hands but then that dim wit Grošák dragged him away for a chat and he didn't see her again all afternoon. The next day he forgot about her. Now he couldn't understand how that was possible.

The priest finished the prayers, sprinkled holy water over the coffin,and the mourners were ready to proceed to the grave. But Vdovjak's mother, looking as if she were carved out of dark wood, had ordered a sermon.

The priest cleared his throat:

"Dearly beloved, brothers and sisters in Christ!"

He was short, with a snub nose tailor-made for snuff. As he delivered the sermon he was like a man possessed, as if he were struck that he had an exceptional audience and decided to teach them a lesson. Andrej listened, appalled. He had never liked Vdovjak. But this he didn't deserve.

"What would be the point of our life if it were to end without warning, at the least expected moment? No, my dear brothers and sisters, we all know that there would be no logic to this. Life goes on, and it is only the body that returns to the soil it came from. The spirit, the soul, the very essence of our being, continues in life eternal." The words "very essence of our being"gave Andrej a coughing fit. His colleagues were fidgeting, only Paštinský listened pensively, and old Dudáš seemed moved. Helena sniffled and Vdovjak's mother, tall and carved out of wood, listened with eyes ablaze.

Andrej noticed that she looked very much like her son or,

rather, that her son had taken after her. Just then it struck him that this sermon was the final joke of his late boss, the capstone on all those annoying speeches he had made them sit through.

At last,the priest said amen, the altar boy leapt up and lifted the cross and the bell in the chapel tolled. Helena emitted another shriek, the pallbearers hoisted the coffin onto their shoulders with a swagger, and a procession of black coats set out in their wake. Andrej pretended to stoop to tie his shoelaces and when everyone was gone, madea dash for the exit. On his way out he caught up with the Redhead.

"You don'tlike it when the earth thuds on the coffin lid?"

"I hate this kind of spectacle."

"So what made you come?"

"What about you?"

"Vdovjak was my boss."

"They made me come, I'm the youngest one in the office, you see. He'd done some work for us and I happen to be the one sent to events like this. Meetings no one else feels like going to, like that conference the other day, and now the funeral…"

"I'm greatly in their debt."

She gave a chuckle and Andrej apprised her figure. It was a good figure.

"He has made the supreme sacrifice, as our company lawyer Mr. Paštinský would say. And now so have we."

"If it were up to me, I would just drop the bodies in the grave without a word. Let their family bury them. Somewhere in a forest or a garden. Who needs undertakers and Latin... And those who have no one should be cremated and their ashes scattered from a plane. We would save on cemetery space. That would suit me fine. How about you?"

"When the time comes none of it will make any difference to me. At least I hope it won't."

"If they got up to this kind of shenanigans on my grave I'd be so livid I'd come back to life."

"Oh, but you're still very young."

"All of twenty-five."

He thought she was younger than that, but repeated:

"You are very young."

They reached the main road in Slávičie údolie, which had long ceded the romantic atmosphere suggested by its name, nightingale valley, to Tatra cars, the zoo and the dead.

"Should we take a bus?"

"I'd rather walk."

"You're not too cold?"

October was billowing about the tarmac with its flu-filled mists.

"I'm never cold."

Andrej remembered what Peter had said. There definitely was something southern about her. He realised why she reminded him of the sea. He'd seen women like this on the beach.

They walked into town. The wind howled like a chained-up dog.

When they reached the city, he hesitated for a while before asking her for a coffee. She agreed without a second thought. They dived into a café, and he completely forgot he had meant to ring Draha.

Draha was on duty until six o'clock. It was a slippery afternoon, three fractured legs came in, as well as a car crash with severe lacerations. By the time she was able to take off her nurse's gown at six o'clock she was quite exhausted.

"Anyone rung me?" she asked Hanka, the young nurse, although she knew it was pointless. Had he rung, Hanka wouldn't have hesitated to call her out of the operating theatre if necessary. That was the arrangement they had.

"No one," the girl said.

Draha felt a wave of uneasiness mingle with her exhaustion. She glanced in the mirror and applied some cream to the skin around her eyes.

"I'm all wrinkles."

"'Cause you're stupid," said Hanka, sucking on an orange she got from a patient inWard 6.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know what I mean. Dr. Pena..."

"What's Dr. Pena got to do with my wrinkles?"

"Time for you to get married!"

"You're a just a kid."

She dialled the number of the Institute of Architecture. Nobody answered the direct line. She tried reception:

"Is architect Bardoň still around?"

"Everyone left right after lunch," said the porter, recognising her voice. "For a funeral."

"I mean, has anyone come back, by any chance?"

"No. Not a soul. Want me to give him a message when he comes?"

"No, thanks... Or, actually – tell him I rang and that I'm going home now."

She put on some lipstick and decided that today she would finally chuck the hopeless purple shade that added five years to her looks and get herself something brighter. Hanka sucked the juice out of the orange and tossed the pulp into a bucket.

"You're so naïve," she said with an expert air. "He'll never marry you."

Draha moved her hand away from her lips.

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, I took a good look at him the other day. Believe me, I've got an eye for guys. He's good looking, but not the marrying kind."

Draha looked at the 16-year-old's little face, ripe hips and experienced lips. Just look at these chits today, she thought to herself. We weren't like that at their age. She felt a little sting at the thought that the young belonged to quite a different generation now.

"Do you think every woman must get married, come what may?"

"Of course... I mean, not at my age. But later on, yes, every woman must get married."

"Right, if you say so!"

She put on her coat and looked out of the window. It had gone completely dark. She had planned to wait a little longer, Andrej might still call. But she didn't feel like hanging around in reception. He must have got held up somewhere. Maybe he'll stop by later tonight. She was on her way out when the phone rang. She stopped in the doorway, but it was just an ambulance. They were bringing an appendicitis.

As she closed the door, Draha caught Hanka's meaningful glance.

You're stupid, stupid, it said.

Paštinský rang the bell. There was a key in his pocket and he could have just taken it out and let himself in, but over the past eighteen years he got used to ringing and waiting for the sound of steps coming down the hall. The door opened, and he planted a kiss between his wife's ear and corner of her mouth.

"Welcome home."

She helped him out of his coat while he took off his black shoes with a sigh.

"I practically drowned in the mud."

"You must be chilled to the bone. I've been thinking of you."

They went into the kitchen, which was dominated by a glass-fronted cabinet for china and afreshly-laidtable.

"So they've buried him?"

"Yes, he's beyond help. He's gone to his reward, poor guy. He could still have been with us."

"Were there lots of people?"

"Quite a few. Everyone from the Institute, including the director, and the union and the ministry were also represented. There were lots of wreaths and Durdík gave a beautiful speech on behalf of the trade union. Everyone wept. A nice funeral."

"And I imagine Vdovjak's wife wailed, right?"

"She went berserk. She wanted to jump into the grave. It was heart-breaking."

His wife rubbed her eyes.

"You know how it is. Whatever their marriage was like, he was still her husband!"

She started serving the soup and called:

"Children, dinner's on the table!"

Boženka's bare feet came pat-patting, Jozef made them wait.

"Hello, Dad!"

His mother gave him a withering look.

"I mean... good evening!" He plonked himself down at the table, his legs sticking out at the far end.

"In this family we wait for Father to take his seat first."

Reluctantly, Jozef got up.

"You and your rituals!"

Paštinský sat down and dipped a spoon in the soup.

"Bon appetit."

Three pairs of eyes followed his movements. A chorus responded:

"Bon appetit, Daddy."

He chewed slowly and thoroughly. "Properly chewed food is good forthe digestion!" He bestowed on all his actions an air of utmost importance. And though one shouldn't talk while eating, he said:

"The worrying thing is, who's going to take his place?"

His wife sighed.

Looking at the lawyer's creased brow, Jozef remarked:

"As soon as one boss kicks the bucket, the next one comes crawling out of the woodwork. What a life, eh?"

His parents gave him a look.

"But he was a martinet and a hard taskmaster, you said so yourself…"

"Mustn't speak ill of the dead, Jozef! Remember that! And no slurping!"

They ate in silence. Little Božena dripped some sauce on her blouse but her father didn't notice.

"Rumour has it they're bringing in someone quite new. From Bystrica."

"You knew a teacher in Bystrica, remember? The one whose inheritance you dealt with?"

"He's no longer there. He was involved in some fraud, now he lays parquet flooring."

They sighed. Then the mother turned to the children:

"You can't begin to appreciate what it's like to hold down a job and how much your dad worries about you. All the sleepless nights..."

"And all the hair he's lost," Jozef added.

Boženkacringed, her parents raised their eyebrows.

"Leave the table!" hismother said.

He stood up, shrugging his shoulders.

"You ought to have a word with him."

Paštinský agreed. He ought to. He folded his napkin wearily. Jozef was whistling provocatively next door.

"You know I can't stand that whistling of yours," his mother yelled. He stopped but kept muttering something unintelligible under his breath, probably swear words he had picked up from "naughty boys". His mother frowned and Paštinský imagined what his father would have done in such a situation. He would have given him a clip or two round the ear. He would have grounded him. This was the kind of thing that would also do Jozef good. But he didn't have the energy. And he knew it wouldn't be much use. He'd been an obedient child but Jozef was a rebel. He always knew better. And maybe it was all for the best. Hopefully he wouldn'tcower before his superiors the way he does. He pushed his plate away and poured himself some mineral water. He was tired of the kitchen tiles, of his wife's kindliness, Božena's sheepish smile, the Institute, and of his own thoughts.

"Oh well," he said. "Small children, small worries, big ones, big worries." For the first time he felt hecouldn't find the right words.

The café was suffused with anorange-coloured intimacy, cigarette smoke and the smell of vermouth. A youth with a pale blue face

and a sadly wrinkled jacket fed the jukebox, which played Parlezmoi d'amour. Andrej helped the Redhead out of her coat. An emerald-coloured jumper clung softly to her breasts, and her copper hair shimmered down her bosom like sheets of metal.

"Are you hungry?"

"I'm always hungry."

"But there's probably nothing to eat here, only cakes."

"Let's have two each, right?"

A waitress with menacing, bushy eyebrows walked past carrying two brandies. She shot them a frown: she resented men with pretty women.

"She looks like Mephistopheles," the Redhead said.

Andrej ordered some coffee and a cake piled high with whipped cream.

He glanced at the Redhead and thought how strange it all was. This was their first opportunity for a proper chat, and one might have expected them to feel their way tentatively around each other with questions like: What do you think of Le Corbusier? or: I can't stand the Baroque, cany ou? – since they were architects. Or maybe: I love jazz, or I went to Romania on holiday last summer, or did you also like The Cranes?

But the Redhead didn't seem to feel the need to get to know him. It was quite pleasant actually. His eyes were happy to see her, his hands itched to touch her. He thought he was in the mood for a bit of flirting. He deliberately repeated to himself the word "flirting". All his relationships consisted of flirting and he was always on his guard, slightly anxious in case they turned into something else. He was committed to his work and his freedom, but to nothing else. He was afraid of commitment. But this girl was just too pretty, and he felt attracted to her.

He watched as she broke off a piece of chocolate and thrust it in her mouth. Insatiable, he thought, although to him this term evoked something quite different. She ate the way children do. Involuntarily he thought back to the time when a slice of bread with lard seemed the greatest miracle to him. He could see his mother coming into the courtyard with a loaf of

bread and some onions. He would eat it with hands covered in sand, crunching the warm crust, savouring the fragrance of the caraway seeds between his teeth. He admired the girl's concentration and all of a sudden, a feeling of enormous happiness washed over him. The coolness of the marble table top, the coffee, the sadness of the song on the jukebox – it all felt intensely pleasant. But the Redhead was the most pleasant of all. He felt a surge of desire. When she raised her eyes, he said:

"Can we go over to your place?"

For a moment every sound stopped as if the two of them had found themselves in a vacuum. She could have taken offence. Most women would have taken offence, out of sheer politeness. Andrej reckoned she wasn't like most women. Actually, he didn't reckon anything. He just waited in trepidation.

"Why not."

She sounded amused. He suddenly felt like hurting her in some way. Twisting her arm or kissing her in front of the entire café.

The waitress with the bushy eyebrows cleared her throat.

"Change of shift. Could you pay up, please?"

An acquaintance of his walked past. He gavethe Redhead a long, hard look, as if planning to draw her. Only after that did he notice Andrej, said hello, glanced back at the girl and gave a meaningful grin. Andrej was at a loss for words. She didn't seem in the least embarrassed. As if strangers propositioned her every day and she consented every time. So he said nothing, just held out her coat for her. The young man with a pale blue face was still tirelessly listening to Parlezmoi d'amour and the steam in the coffee machine hissed away.

"I'm Vanda," she said.

"I'm Andrej."

Suddenly it all seemed funny.

They left laughing, leaving the door wide open. The treacly sweet song followed after them and fell into a puddle.

The dark-grey street resembled a tunnel, with lamps like distant

white moons proving that fog was not a vapour but a sticky liquid that kept coming down forming little lumps on the pavement. Shivering with cold, Draha drew her coat round her more tightly and turned up her collar, but she didn't feel like going home. Deep down she knew Andrej wouldn't come. She stopped to look at some enamelled cookware in a shop window and pictured herself standing over a hot stove in a white apron, tasting the dinner she prepared for her husband,who had Andrej's face. She had to laugh. Picturing Andrej in the marriage cage was like imagining an idyll with a Bengal tiger. Not that he was as savage. He just wasn't the type. And she wasn't keen on cooking anyway. A white kitchen with enamelled cookware was out of the question.

Someone bumped into her, she said sorry, and remembered Hanka. The little shrew was right. Inside every woman there'sa hidden compartment desperate for marriage, and it just swells up with the years and loneliness.

They would have a flat of their own, with a chestnut-wood bedroom, and a daughter called Ivanka. Andrej would come home from the off ice and sit down to his designs, he'd be gentle and cheerful... Draha caught a glimpse of her own eyes in the glass and turned away in disgust. Her imagination defied her will, flitting about like red birds and taking advantage of every unguarded moment to descendon her eyes. She entered the shop.

"I'd like a tea strainer," she demanded tersely.

"Here you are, madam."

She hated it when people addressed her as"madam" or when patients asked: "And how many children do you have, nurse?"

She paid and was already at the door when the shop assistant called out:

"Your strainer, madam!"

As she went back to pick up the package the shop assistant smiled.

"These things happen. Everyone's so busy these days."

If I were younger, she would have said: you must be in love. But I'm not young. She was cross with herself again for

dwelling on it, for tormenting herself. She had to do something. Have abite to eat, take a bath, tuck herself up in a warm bed. She'd had two night shifts that week. That's what exhaustion did to you. She had to eat something, go to bed, get some sleep, and everything would be all right.

She forced herself to think of the young engineer who had died of leukaemia on her ward. Whenever she wasn't feeling good she would think of someone who was even worse off. A trick of hers.

She saw the man'spinched face, his damp hair, and his fingers moving restlessly on the bedcover. His colleagues said he was very talented. He had been working on some problem, he had told her what it was, but she forgot. Just a few more days and he would have cracked it.

His fiancée used to come and visit him. A pretty, dark-haired girl, she would sit by his bedside in silence. They both knew he was dying. They didn't talk, didn't even look at each other. He seemed relieved when she went home. He never spoke about her. He never mentioned his parents or his girlfriends, not even the important work he was involved in and was supposed to be so good at. He planted a few lemon seeds in a pot and the only thing he seemed to care about was whether they would grow. When a tiny shoot emerged from the compost, it made him as happy as if he had regained his health. Maybe he had made a bet with himself. If the seed sprouts, I will recover, if it doesn't, I'll die. Patients often made bets of this kind with themselves. Then the engineer waited for a first leaf to emerge. It took a long time; the pot sat on his bedside table andhe wouldn't take his eyes off it. The consultant didn't usually let people do that but on this occasion he turned a blind eye. Draha was the one who shut the young man's eyes when the day came. The cleaner wanted to throw the pot out, so she took it home. The lemon tree had grown three leaves by now. All sorts of strange things happened in hospital as people surrendered their pride and confidence along with their civvy street underwear. Under general anaesthetic they would tell the weirdest stories, and when in agony they would call

out names their nearest and dearest didn't recognise.

Draha had worked her way through every department, and the hospital had bred in her a kind of generosity or numbness. She no longer needed to stick her head under a pillow when people screamed. She didn't scream either. But still she couldn't stop herself from feeling pain or wallowing in a sentimental mood of an evening.

They stopped outside an old block adorned with a relief of the goddess of plenty, or maybe the portrait of a landlord.

"Do you have your own place?" Andrej asked.

"Sort of."

A car at the end of the street gave a honk like an animal in the cold.

"Is it really all right to go to yours?"

She ran her tongue along her lips as if trying to taste the fog. He felt rather self-conscious again, which was quite unlike him, but he had to admit that he was enjoying it. She took him by the hand.

"Come on."

They ran up the dark staircase holding on to the spiral railing. The house reeked of old age. She kept ahead of him and he felt the warm taste of his heart in his mouth. At the top of the stairs she stopped by a tall door and rummaged in her handbag. He reached out to embrace her, but she wriggled free and disappeared down a dark hallway. He hurried after her and banged his forehead on something hard.

"That was the wardrobe," he heard her calm voice. "It's an ingenious arrangement we have here, the light switch is at the other end."

She stubbed her toe on something but just then the light came on and Andrej could see a long, narrow hallway with a tall ceiling, packed with ancient wardrobes, paintings and shelving.

A woman's voice rang out:

"Is that you?"

Vanda shouted:

"Fix your hair, we have a male visitor."

The voice gave a moan, then there was the sound of some tramping. The Redhead was taking her shoes off as if he wasn't there.

He stood there stiffly, cursing himself.

"Do take your coat off!"

The door flew open, revealing a ginger-haired creature reminiscent of the White Lady of Levoča.

"This is Zoša. My sister. And this is Mr Bardoň, the architect."

"Ah, the architect," said the girl in a whiny little voice. "So you're the architect. Vanda has told me about you."

He made a surprised face.

"You're the one who designed that high-rise hall of residence. And you met at a conference…"

"Shut up!" her sister snapped.

"Don't be angry with her, she's like that. She didn't tell me you were coming, I'm not ready to receive visitors, we never have any."

"I'm not a visitor, madam," he mumbled, thinking that the little minx had played a trick on him.

The little minx wasn't trying to hide her amusement. She pushed him into a strange room divided by a curtain. It was full of gloomy furniture with cone-shaped legs and curlicued columns. Vines crawled creepily over dark brown wallpaper and moustachioed gentlemen glared from oil paintings.

The sisters eyed him with curiosity.

"Well, the saying'my house is my castle' certainly applies to this place."

"This is Zoša's castle. She's the lady of the castle and a staunch defender of tradition."

"Would you like some coffee?" she asked gently.

"I thought mead would be served in such a place."

"Mead? Goodness, mead? I'd love to offer you some but all I have is coffee or tea."

"Tea!" Vanda ordered. She squeezed through a gap in the

middle of the curtain, pulling him after her. The other half of the room had yellow walls and a red carpet, a camp bed, a low table and two armchairs with metal legs. A dreamily poetic drawing by Paul Klee on the wall testified to modernity. Books were piled on the floor, and a piece of parchment with a wire served as a lamp. That was all.Vanda the architect said:

"We're both obstinate. And a bit extreme."

Andrej stuck his head back through the curtain. He felt as if he had stepped into a time machine and found himself in the previous century.

"They should bring schoolchildren here as part of their history classes."

Zoša took this as a compliment. She flashed him a sweet smile.

"Tea will be ready in a minute."

A bronze rococo-style clock started tinkling a slight little minuet. The whole thing felt unreal, like a scene from a Bergman film. The absurd informality of one sister and the ridiculous affectation of the other, their room and the fog outside the window – any minute, they would fly off,or start speaking in verse, Andrej thought.

Vanda stood up and turned to her sister:

"Will you entertain our visitor while I go and make us something to eat?"

The lady of the castle sat down on the edge of the camp bed, crossing her legs bashfully beneath her flowing robe. She seemed to be racking her brain.

"Do you like lobster?"

His eyes popped out.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you like eating lobster?"

"Why lobster, of all things? Have you got some?"

"Oh, no. It's just that I have this manual on etiquette, you see, and it says that young ladies should ask gentlemen such questions. It provides an opportunity to talk about what men like best – I mean food. Or their adventures abroad..."

She really meant it and couldn't understand what made him laugh.

"I must confess I've never eaten lobster in my life. And I haven't had any adventures abroad either. Also, I'm not keen on following a manual on the art of conversation. I'd be much more interested to learn something about you. For example, why do both of you have Polish names?

"We're half-Polish, on our father's side. Our grandfather was a count, you see. As was our great-grandfather. And great-great-grandfather. The whole lineage. We used to own an estate in the Duchy of Krakow. Our mother is dead. She was Slovak, but her father was descended from Hungarian gentry. Our grandfather on our mother's side spelled his name Márthoni. And his ancestors were apparently called Martini. Which suggests a link with the ancient Italian princely dynasty of Martini."

"I hope you own up to this aristocratic descent in your official CV ?

Her jaw fell and she seemed quite discomfited. She obviously didn't have the slightest sense of humour.

"Are you a historian?"

"Only in my private capacity. My father didn't want me to focus on that." She resembled her sister but her red hair lacked the lustrousness of Vanda's. The main difference, however, was her manner. Her enunciation was meticulous and her gestures stiff; she looked like an antique. She is a perfect match for her furniture, Andrej thought.

"Does your father live with you?"

"After our mother died he took retirement and moved back to Poland. He is very, very fond of Poland. His sister lives close to the family's former estate. He followed the call of his ancestors, if you know what I mean."

Andrej didn't know what "following the call of one's ancestors" meant.

"Are you a student?" he asked quickly when he noticed she was about to launch into another lecture on feudal history.

"No, I'm a teacher. In a primary school."

Now he knew where her schoolmarmy tone came from.

They sat in silence. He realised that the art of conversation could be quite difficult. He was good at small talk but it was no use in this case. The girl sat stiffly and bolt upright, knees pressed together, eyes glued to the knot of his tie. As if there was an octopus lodged on it or at least a mustard stain. He started to feel uncomfortable. He touched the knot on his tie, prepared to talk about anything, even lobsters.

Just then Zoša realised she was alone with a young man, scruncheda handkerchief between her fingers and made a gesture that tried to be flirtatious and bashful at the same time.

A chill ran through Andrej.

Fortunately, Vanda crawled back through the gap in the curtain. She had changed into tight black trousers and a flannelette shirt.

She brought a tray with something that smelled nice.

"You could have laid a table in my room," her sister remarked."I can get a tablecloth, and we have plenty of china."

"Oh, forget the china. Bon appetit!"

Andrej helped himself to some fried potatoes and observed with amusement the shocked face of the White Lady and the voracious appetite of her sister. They were more like grandmother and granddaughter. Zoša stood up and Andrej grabbed Vanda's hand, relieved to see her go. But the teacher crawled back again, carrying two monogrammed damask napkins.

Just before eight o'clock he got up to leave. Vanda walked him to the hallway, he clasped her in his arms and hissed into her green eyes.

"You've taken me for a ride, haven't you?"

Her body felt hot and soft, and her lips were full. When he touched them, they seemed to crackle with electricity. The gate on the ground floor squeaked, someone was coming up the stairs. They stepped away from each other, panting.

"I like you," he said. "Where can we meet in future?

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Here?"

"Definitely not here. Zoša is worse than a dozen chaperones."

"Does she ever go to the cinema?"

"Only if I go too. Well, you'll just have to figure something out."

The building went quiet again and she moved closer to him. Andrej felt he was losing himself. The stairway vanished and with it all its smells, sounds, everything.

She pushed him away.

"Now off you go!"

He walked down the stairs, turning back to look at her copper-coloured head leaning low over the railing. Suddenly frightened that she might tumble down, he reached out to protect her, but she just laughed and leaned even lower. She was now virtually dangling above the stairwell and there was something terrifying about it.

"Good night," he called into the stairwell.

"Good night!"

His foot slipped on the wet pavement and he bumped into a lamppost, but barely noticed it. The fog glued his nostrils together. He felt as if he'd had too much to drink.

Excerpt translated by Julia and Peter Sherwood

PETER JAROŠ

The Millennial Bee

The Millennial Bee

A hundred years of solitude in the Slovak fashion.

A generational novel, Tisícročná včela tells the story of the Pichanda family during the period from 1887 to 1917, a tale which mirrors the life and work of bees in a hive. This forms an epic metaphor of Slovak life, the thousand-year duration of the Slovak nation in an often unfriendly historical environment, a people who have survived a millennium of contrasting fortunes thanks to their vitality and bee-like industry. This is Peter Jaroš' masterpiece and one of the greatest novels of modern Slovak literature, a bestseller immediately after publication. The novel was the inspiration for a cult film directed by Juraj Jakubisko, which won several international awards, including the Golden Phoenix at the Venice International Film Festival in 1983.

Peter Jaroš (1940)

Slovak writer, novelist, editor, playwright, screenwriter, politician, and author of one of the most important Slovak novels of the 20th century, Peter Jaroš has written more than two dozen short stories and novels, radio plays, film scripts and one children's book. He began publishing literary works in the mid-1950s – poetry, prose, and later also film and television scripts. In his work, he embraces Slovak surrealism and Czech poetics, integrating dreams, visions, supernatural phenomena and miracles into his prose as characteristic features of magical realism. In his works, he focuses mainly on everyday life, its small details and facts, through which he passes on to relationships (love, friendship) and major questions of life and death.

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Worn out by the episode with the fishbone, Samo slipped off to the big apiary at the very end of the garden and lay down on its old wooden settle, covered with sheepskins and threadbare coats. There were only six hives there then but the buzzing of the bees was so loud and monotonous, tired Samo was soon nodding off. With heavy eyelids, he tentatively swallowed his saliva two or three times then grabbed his throat incredulously; before he could fall asleep, the terrible thought came to him that the thick, sharp fishbone would pierce the walls of his throat causing the blood to gush both out through his mouth but also down his gullet. And he would choke and yell out "Help, help! I can't breathe! I can't even speak! Help, help!..." With an expression of horror, he realized that just a moment before he had almost suffocated at his own hands and he thought: "If I had been alone with that fishbone stuck in my throat, God knows, it might well have choked me!" But now he fingered the bone in his trouser pocket, pulled it out, examined it, licked it, bit into it tentatively and then put it back. Only now, content and at peace, did he fall into a deep sleep. And he would have slept for a long time, even until the next day, if

those bees hadn't started bothering him. They sat on his forehead and crawled over his face and body; one even probed his hairy nostrils. Half-trapped inside Samo's nose, the bee started noisily speaking its bee language, buzzing, flapping its wings and rubbing its feet in self-preservation until the sleeping man sneezed loudly and the bee flew out onto the floor. Samo stirred from his sleep for a moment, ran his hand over his itchy nose, turned on to his right side and again fell into some kind of half-sleep. He could hear the bees and flies buzzing and feel them crawling over his arms but he could barely manage to move. And it was then that it seemed to him that the robust queen bee from the biggest hive looked out from beneath its lid, fixed her five eyes on him, stuck her long tongue out, shook her antennae and gave him her widest smile.

"Come and lie with me, come on," said the queen bee to Samo smiling seductively, secreting from the ten pairs of spiracles on the side of her body an intoxicating, colourful and irresistible scent.

"No, no, I'm scared, I'm scared!" shouted Samo, squirming on the floor.

But the queen bee merely laughed with contempt. And then the lid of the hive started to rise slowly and the ten-thousand-strong bee family quickly gathered around her. She then suddenly became earnest and using her complex arrangement of mandibles and proboscis announced in a hushed voice: "Samko, my child, I am your thousand-year-old queen bee. I am the only creature who will never die but will stay here in this hive and go on living forever. I know all about your ancestors, your living family and all about you. And I will know all about your children, your grandchildren, your great-grandchildren···Every day, thousands of my workers bring me news···You should take me as your wife and live with me for a thousand years···You should take me as your wife···"

Samo abruptly sat up and stared at the hive in front of him. But he could see nothing strange about it. He then rubbed his eyes, looked again and got to his feet. Walking over to one of the hives, he lifted its lid and looked at the bees below. They were all buzzing and swarming and in the middle he saw the large queen, lazily stretched out over the bodies of drones and worker bees. Somehow it made him angry and so he reached into the hive and grabbed a handful of the bees, examined them all then put them back. And he carried on doing it until he found the queen bee in his hand:

"Was it you provoking me?" he said to her. "Was it you taking liberties? I could squeeze the life out of you between two of my fingers···And you say you're a thousand years old and will live forever!"

He flung the bees back into the hive, put the lid back on top and only then realized that not one had stung him. He checked his arms, gasped in surprise and then, hearing a gentle tap on the door of the apiary, immediately forgot about the bees. He probably forgot about them because he was so shocked – and he was so shocked because no-one ever knocked on the door of the apiary. His heart was beating fast as the door slowly opened. Not out of fear, though, he told himself in shame but out of expectancy.

It was young Mária Dudačová. She peeped into the apiary but when she noticed the startled Samo, she just gasped and immediately closed the door again.

"Mária!" he yelled.

He dashed to the door and flung it open, intending to chase after her. But he quickly stopped to draw breath because there she was standing right in front of him.

"Come in!" he said.

She hesitated for a second and then stepped into the apiary where she stood in the middle, stroking her hair and smiling prettily.

"Have you been looking for me?" he asked.

"I didn't know you were here."

"Why did you knock on the door?"

"I needed to get my courage up?"

"And did you?" smiled Samo.

"Yes," she replied. "You saw me open the door."

"Shall we sit down?" And he gently took her hand and sat her next to him on the settle. She didn't resist. They sat right next to each other, still holding hands, with their thighs and calves touching. And as they looked into each other's eyes, they both started to take deeper breaths. Mária only lowered her gaze when he touched her lips with his fingers before moving them down to her breasts. She then suddenly pushed her body up next to his and he wrapped his arms around her. She groaned in rapture and desire: "Samo... Samko!" she murmured, kissing his chest and neck. Again he embraced her passionately pressing his lips to her eyelids, mouth and lips before moving down to her neck, her shoulders and her breasts. And when she lay down next to him on the settle, he whispered into her ear:

"Do you want to, Mária? Today?"

"Today?" she answered in surprise. But she didn't resist.

Their lovemaking was frenzied as they exerted their bodies in their devoted attention to the other. Without even being aware of it, they moved to the rhythm of the bees buzzing, the closeness of their elastic and smooth skin pressed together arousing in them new heights of boldness and passion; they could smell each other's bodies, their breath, their sweat, all of which was transmuted into love...It went on for what seemed like hours and

after they had finished, they lay motionless next to each other. It was a long time before their eyes were seeing again and their ears hearing.

"Why is it like it is?" asked Mária after a while.

"Like what?"

"So good, when we're together!"

"I love you!" he said.

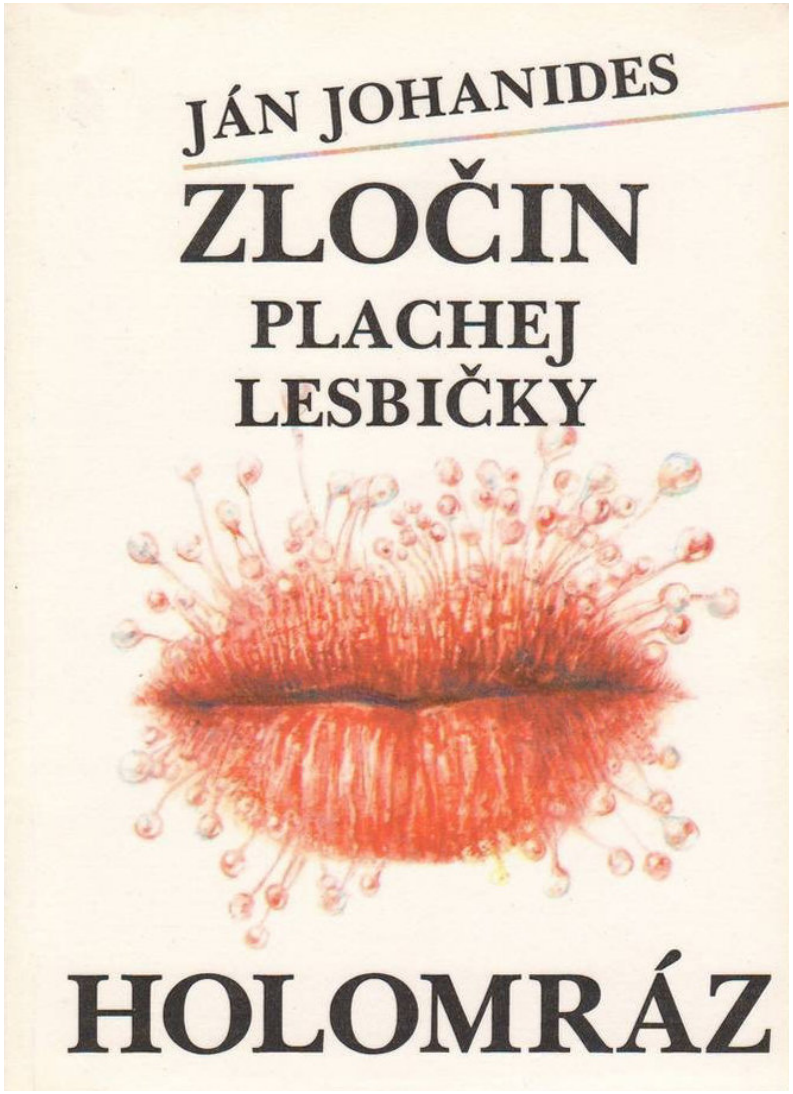
"Will it always be this good?" she asked.

And he just sat there not answering. But she didn't insist.

Excerpt translated by Jonathan Gresty

JÁN JOHANIDES

Hearfrost



Hearfrost

A short text that addresses the limits of human courage and the questions of responsibility. The story of a dark past, unpunished villains and suffering innocents is distinguished by the author's wide range of narrative approaches.

The story has criminal undertones and is told from the point of view of the main character – an actor who has bought a cottage amongst remote smallholdings. He finds himself in the middle of intrigues, hostility, local wrongdoing and covert crimes from the past. Despite the fact that he does not want to get involved in them, through his neighbours – victims and minions of the former regime – he is exposed to several conflicting accounts of what has happened. The author gradually reveals the characters' motives but withholds explanations and thus leaves the reader in a cowl of ambiguity. The facts are challenged by the conversations of other characters, which obscure and distort the truth and create subjective versions of events that diverge wildly.

Ján Johanides (1934 – 2008)

Ján Johanides was a Slovak novelist and essayist who established himself as one of a generation of important prose writers in the 1960s and brought to Slovak literature an intense interest in the extreme forms of human existence. His original poetics, inspired by existentialism and the Nouveau Roman, focus on articulating unnoticed connections that lead from crime and indifference to their conquest through human empathy.

I could see that Dežo was still in love without expecting thanks for it. In love. With children? But with a woman? With women? With a horse? With his dogs? Probably with all of them. His eyes attested to those feelings of affection (an almost fearful excess of them, in fact) which are the guarantee of great tenderness.

"Are you sure you are such a good-for-nothing?"

"Well aren't I? Just because I pay my taxes honestly doesn't mean I'm not." For a moment he bowed his head before adding pensively: "You know what God does... God can't be solved like a crossword on the Britva Express."

I asked what the Britva Express was and he said it was what they called the train that arrived there at half-past one, bringing the gypsies home from their morning shift.

"And since we are on the subject, esteemed actor that you are, I'll tell you something dramatic: it happened in Leopoldov. I was serving my ninth year for that shop assistant. Who hasn't been inside for at least five years will never know what it means to do nine. I still had another two ahead of me but then I was granted amnesty.

"Before they banged me up in Leopoldov, my rheumatism started getting worse. Sometimes it gave me absolute hell. One winter, first thing in the morning, believe me or not, I took a piece

of sandpaper and started scratching my knees with it just to get the blood flowing a bit and to warm them up. I'd got it from the workshop. I didn't go to the doctor because I didn't want to get solitary – you can imagine. I could have coped with the rheumatism – it was enough to get out of the woods. But in Leopoldov it got even worse: when the frosts came, my jaw and teeth started to ache – even the teeth which I no longer had! You will say: teeth you haven't got can't ache. And by rights, that's how it should be – and is, of course. But you'd be making a big mistake. They do ache – even teeth that you've had pulled out! At least mine did. But not just my teeth but my jaw and my whole head – it was agony. Ask a man who has had his arm or leg chopped off – ask Máslik, the ex-railwayman who lives below me. Ask him how much his missing leg can hurt when there is a sharp frost on the way. Not just his stump but his whole leg hurts – he can feel it there as if he still had the whole thing." He sipped from his slivovica. "My teeth started to ache before midnight, at the time when every lag just wants to sleep. And once, when they were really aching like hell, I noticed that another guy in our cell – his name was Šubašič – wasn't sleeping either. It was only later that I found that he'd had problem sleeping for a long time.

"I found out he'd not slept properly for six months. How on earth did he manage to work so hard and not flake out? Whenever my teeth started giving me grief, Šubašič was awake. And then, one day, he started to sleep properly. But how did he do it? I'll tell you: one evening I could see him lying nicely on his bed looking at a postcard – a colour postcard. There was no writing on the other side but I could see it had been fingered enough times – but that's another matter. It was the kind of postcard someone on holiday would send you. Just imagine how big the sky was on that postcard. Really big. Blue – deep blue. And there was just one cloud – though not a big one. And under the cloud was a town and a harbour with boats. And one more thing which I almost forgot to mention: there were numbers written on the postcard in ink with a sharp pen. Tiny numbers: ten, fifteen, three,

nought, five – a whole series of them. They were written on the sky, in the cloud, on the roofs of the houses, on the boats, everywhere. Can you imagine a postcard covered in numbers? Šubašič didn't want to say a word about it and in the end we stopped pestering him. But every evening he would spend about fifteen minutes staring at that postcard before falling asleep. He would fall asleep! And I would lie there awake, my teeth killing me while he slept like a log! How was it possible that he slept like that?"

I guessed that the postcard with numbers on it was some sort of ingenious prison cure for insomnia, a kind of brainteaser or puzzle that takes the mind off bad things, tires the eyes and induces sleepiness according to some obscure principles. I thought about it but said nothing so as not to interrupt Dežo's flow.

"It got my blood up even more to see him snoring there. I started to hate him! Do you understand?! You don't, do you? And then that evil day – evening, in fact – arrived. The secret police came to search the cells. They were looking for alnagon – or so we found out later. But instead they found Šubašič's postcard.

"The screw who found the postcard and ripped it to shreds didn't look like such a bad guy. He was the kind who if you saw him outside in civvies you'd think was a decent person. When Šubašič saw him ripping up his postcard, he looked... as if he had seen something unbelievable, something impossible, something which just couldn't happen – and he jumped on him like a tiger. And the screw killed him! Is that why God saved me, I sometimes wonder – so that I could see how that STB agent killed him? Surely not! He thrashed him. When we carried him out afterwards, he left behind him a trail of blood, shit and brains." Dežo took a deep breath, raised the glass of slivovica to his lips and drained it.

"I can't get rid of that image, I just can't. You know, when I see a snail on the road and I see that trail of slime it leaves behind

it…" and his voice quavered a little, "I just have to crouch down and pick it up and then put it in the grass somewhere. Šubašič left a trail like that behind him. And those secret policemen then yelled at us for not wrapping him up in something. But in what? In our blankets, so that we would have then had to sleep in the freezing cold?! Did God save me in order to see that? I think God only wants me to be Dežo Hviždžák and to take care of my wife and children.

"And then, you know what happened? About eight years later, I met that guy who'd thrashed Šubašič, who'd kept on punching him even when he was lifeless on the ground. We were on a trip in Poland – in Zakopane. I was with my youngest daughter and her daughter, who'd just had whooping cough. Also with my son, Lojzo – he was never ashamed of his dad! And I meet that old screw on the stairs and it is he who starts talking to me – Mr Hviždžák, Mr Hviždžák, do you remember me? And I reply – of course, Mr... but I had forgotten his surname. I was just shattered when I saw him, when I recognized him. It was horrendous. And I was so stunned, I just embraced him in terror. And I smiled at him and I hugged him – and you wouldn't believe how. He was really thrilled – like a little boy, especially when I told him how he'd once given me a large cigarette stub – which he hadn't. He never gave me anything! We started to drink vodka together. Here I am talking to a famous actor like you but I am much worse than an actor! And we were soon on first-name terms – you wouldn't believe it. We were soon cursing the prison together – he an ex-screw now working at Slovlik and me an old lag. I could see how much he wanted to talk to me. I know I told him a joke – I've forgotten it now but it was a good one – all about three little whores who were guarding a tiger and lieutenant. It's a shame I've forgotten it – he really loved that joke and took out a little notebook so that he could write it down; he couldn't stop laughing... And then he stood up – he was drunk by now – kissed me on the ear and said: 'Dežo, you're a lovely guy – I'm going to pour myself something' – and he was still laughing. Then, all of a

sudden, bang! He hit the ground. He was lying there, still laughing. I carried him over to the window with the help of some of the other guests there. But then he turned as red as a rooster comb and a trail of piss starting seeping out of him. He was dead before the ambulance arrived. He'd had a stroke. And now tell me… if life can really be borne without drinking? I drink because I can't bear this world! I like life but this world – "

Dežo stood up – his face was as red as if he had been lying out in the sun all day with beads of sweat running down his forehead, cheeks, throat and chest. He grabbed his shirt and kidney belt, pushed the door open with his elbow and went outside. There was horror in his eyes. I walked after him.

"He just carried on laughing – I couldn't stand it anymore," murmured Dežo. And then he pursed his lips and slowly, carefully, as if he wasn't sure his limbs would obey him, sat down on the grass. He breathed in hard. The wind was again blowing like when he had gone out of the door, rustling the leaves, the tall weeds and the bushes.

"He went on laughing." And this time he said it out loud but with a strange kind of helplessness. I was staring at a tall oak growing alongside the cemetery and imagining Mrs Jablončáková sitting in a gloomy boiler room near her high-pitched alarm clock writing Hviždžák's life story. "He went on laughing even when he was lying down." He snatched at the grass as if he wanted to tear out a clump before immediately, almost tenderly, letting go of it and resting his hand on the ground. "And then he passed out."

I looked at the centuries-old trees nearby, at the Turkey oaks, white elms, field elms, chestnuts, hornbeams and walnuts beyond the cemetery and I suddenly recalled the words of my father and how he once said that at the beginning of every prayer, there should be, above all, respect even if it means you get nothing that you pray for. I observed the angles and silhouettes of the memorials jutting out in the spaces between the thujas, birches, weeping willows above the high sandstone wall. I looked at all the

overgrown greenery in the middle of my land in which Dezider Hviždžák was now sitting.

He sat there in silence. And then he abruptly sat up, as if he was going to stand, and glanced over at me though I didn't manage to catch the look in his eyes: "It is a nice place you have." He put his shirt on and asked with a hint of hardness in his voice: "Do you want to settle down here?" I wasn't sure how or even whether to reply to him so said nothing.

"I know how much you bought it for – don't be angry about me knowing it, you famous actor, you. Lukovič is an acquaintance of mine. He is afraid of going empty-handed to his daughter. If his sons hadn't legged it off to Canada, he wouldn't have sold it. That's why he brought the construction trailer. So he could build a place here and sleep in the trailer so that no-one would steal his building material."

He carried on talking, now with a strange, rather suspicious degree of self-restraint: "Look up there! No, up there, right behind where my finger is. You could build a little chalet like that! Can you see it? Nice, isn't it? You have to admit, it's a beauty. The owner only comes once in a while, though – for pheasants and rabbits. Also for the deer higher up. He's a good angler too. Twice he's caught such pike!" (showing the size of the fish with his hands) "Beautiful pike, Mr Psotník. Štefanko, my oldest grandson, took a photo of him with those pike... He would like to make your acquaintance."

"Who? Who is he?"

"The guy I'm talking about."

"But who is he? And why does he want to meet me?"

"Simply because he does. Don't you understand? You're famous. You're on television."

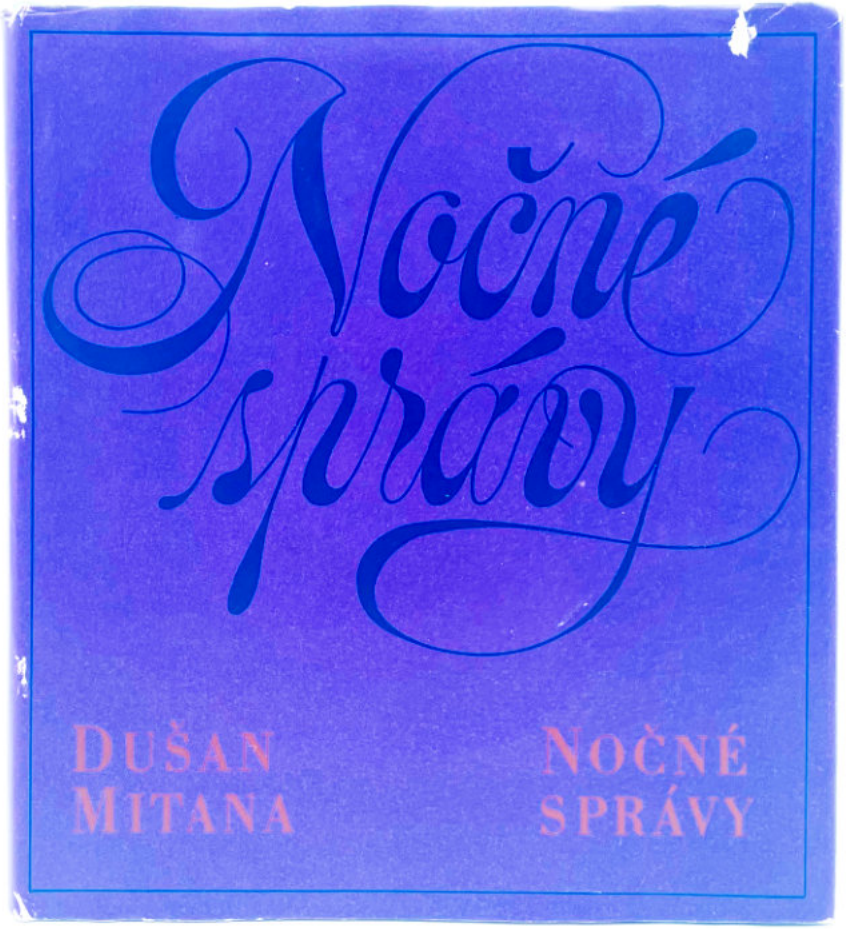
"Mr Hviždžák..."

"He said: 'Dežo, listen. Introduce me to him. We will help him. He's a good comic but he's no handyman. He needs a chalet but doesn't know how to do it – he's even dug a wastepipe to his trailer! Listen to me!' That's what he said. 'It's my birthday soon. We'll roast a lamb. I've been promised one – I've already seen it. It's grazed on the best pasture far-and-wide. That Psotník is still not married, is he? I'll bring both my daughters…'"

Excerpt translated by Jonathan Gresty

DUŠAN MITANA

Nighttime Reports



Nighttime Reports

The stories of Dušan Mitana, a master of short forms, are typified by their combination of a hard, bony reality and elements of the fantastical and the absurd – rather like the era in which they were written.

The second short story collection by this now legendary author, is similar to his début, Psie dni, in blending an everyday reality of apparently quite ordinary characters with various dreamlike and mysterious elements. Although the collection came out in 1976, it harks back to the 1960s with its evocations of freedom in a totalitarian regime as well as of its harsh suppression after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by occupying forces in 1968. The collection includes the story Ihla (The Needle), considered one of the best Slovak literary texts of the 20th century.

Dušan Mitana (1946 – 2019)

Dušan Mitana was an iconic figure in modern Slovak literature and the most distinctive member of the generation of authors that first made their mark in the wild 1960s. From 1975 onwards, when he left his job at the Romboid magazine in protest against normalization, he worked as a freelance writer. One of the first Slovak authors to write experimental post-modernist prose with hints of magical realism, his work is characterized by sometimes absurd contrasts between very mundane plots and elements of suspense, hyperbole, mystery and dreams.

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The Needle

I didn't know my father. He left us when I was two and I never saw him again. And I can't remember my mother. She died less than a year after my father left and because I never really knew her, I always imagined her to be perfect and beautiful. She remained a secret to me and that is the essence of all beauty.

After my mother's death, I went from one person to the next. Her relatives were always decent to me and didn't even ask for gratitude in return; it was enough for them to know they were successful in kindling in me a strong aversion to my father. I quickly realized what they were up to and out of politeness, played along with it, feigning hatred for him with such sincerity, they enabled me to study at university. Their efforts were wholly counterproductive: if they hadn't painted him as the world's biggest villain, he would have remained a stranger to me who I wouldn't have hated (I don't know how you can hate someone you don't know) but would have been quite indifferent to. But instead they sparked my interest in him, an interest which over time grew into feelings of sympathy.

My mother's relatives realized their mistake only when I was in my first year at university, at the time they found out I had started to write stories. And that marked the end between us because I was now being his son, confirming their hidden fears that I had inherited his crazy genes.

My father had been a pastor but at the age of thirty he suddenly started to drink and write poems. When he wanted to recite his verses from the pulpit, the congregation's dismay was such that the church was forced to dispense with his services. One of his poems was preserved; my relatives often read it to me as a warning sign. It was called 'Hope of an Explorer' and went as follows:

When you cease to be,

You will enter the inner world and

Sail across the deepest lying water.

You will discover the secret of this world

And find out that it is simple:

The boats are waiting for the next passengers.

So fear not – you will cease to be.

I am not surprised the church let him go – he didn't give believers much hope in a rich reward after death. One evening he went to the pub and never came back. For the next seventeen years he didn't communicate with any of us but still we got news about him. Some men from our village had met him in Ostrava: he was working in a mine and had no wish to change his job. And then when I was nineteen, I received this letter from him:

Well, my boy, you probably think I have no business writing to you – if we ignore the fact that I begot you, that is. But the fact that I haven't looked after you your whole life doesn't mean that I haven't thought about you and don't love you. Perhaps the best proof of my love and consideration for you, in fact, is that I haven't looked after you. If you knew me, you would realize that that last sentence isn't – unfortunately – a paradox. But let's leave it at that: I don't want you to think I feel the need to apologize. I chose to do what I chose to do and wish to see it through to the end because persistence is the final refuge of those who have erred.

I'm writing to you because I read your story in a magazine and I want to warn you. I could feel from it that you are being destroyed by the same thing which destroyed me – a saviour complex. That's what led

me into theology and up into the pulpit, took my faith in God away, got me writing poems, turned me into an alcoholic and finally brought me here, to a mine, a place where I've finally found my inner peace. Yes, my boy, I even became an alcoholic thanks to my saviour complex. I didn't start to drink out of helplessness but in order to save humanity. One thing had always troubled me: why did God make everything else so perfect but did such a bad job with people? How is it possible? Have you ever thought about it? I did – very often and for many years. And then I came up with an answer: God was delirious when he created Man – drunk out of his mind. Do you understand? It explains the Seventh Day, the day of rest. Why did God, so perfect, need to rest? The need to rest is not a godly attribute. But he clearly had to rest and sleep off his terrible hangover. So do you understand now why I started to drink and write? I wanted to attain the same state of delirium our Creator was in because only then could I understand where he had made a mistake – I wanted to understand and correct it. They were my motives but I overestimated myself and now I think I'd have been better off studying math, physics, chemistry or biology. Imagine this, for instance: mathematics is able to offer mathematically exact proof of its non-existence. Can you understand that? It's pure poetry. The theory of relativity, the theory of anti-matter – that, my boy, is pure poetry. The most exact theories are the most irrational. The most exact science is pure magic. And the most exact formula can appear in a dream. It is poetry, my boy, poetry. But though science is amazing, it's speeding up our end. When science solves everything, people will have no reason to live because a world without mystery is inhuman. I am afraid of it but I'd like to live to see that moment when the ultimate, superlative formula is discovered. Passionate curiosity drives people onwards even though they realize that danger, fatal danger, may be lurking – curiosity and a desire for perfection (perhaps perfection is a measure of freedom – if nothing else, it's a source of satisfaction). Take my life, for instance: I have wandered around in it like in a labyrinth but it never once made me feel hopeless. Instead I have always felt perfect in some way – there was no way out. So curiosity, desire for perfection and courage are what it's all about – courage which is full of fear. A courageous man knows about the abyss ahead, is afraid of it but still goes on walking – he wants to explore and conquer it; it's what he is more curious about than anything. Curiosity is the biggest obsession, in fact: when it hits a man, he will jump off a roof just to find out whether he can fly or not.

Take the following case:

My grandfather, your great-grandfather, was a builder. He built our house, with his own hands and with love, from the foundations to the roof - which gave him somewhere to fall from when he'd nailed down the last shingle. "He flew like an old bird with crippled wings," said my mother when she covered him with the sheet I'd used to gather clover in. Since then I have often dreamt that I can fly and sometimes have the impression that people have evolved from birds and not from monkeys. Do you think that he fell from the roof for nothing? No chance! He jumped because he wanted to find out if he would grow wings. Yes, my boy, your great-grandfather was very curious and we've got it from him.

My father, your grandad, was a tailor. He would make clothes in a kind of ecstasy – as if he was writing a poem. He would put his whole heart into every movement of the needle, thinking over each stitch like a poet looking for just the right word. He didn't earn very much but the clothes he made were perfect. When he was sixty, he sat on a needle. I'll always remember the words Dr. Krištofík, my father's admirer and long-term customer used when determining his cause of death: "He died as a result of his heart being pierced by a needle that entered his bloodstream through his backside and was then carried to his heart by his blood." Dr. Krištofík wrote these words and shook his head uncomprehendingly. At the time I thought he was just being cruel and maliciously ironic. But I didn't know then that it was natural; I didn't know that my father's backside and needle were both governed by ancient family law and that the men in it were all destined to die at the hands of the things which they loved most.

I can feel that the needle which pricks all of our backsides at birth is getting nearer to my heart. Perhaps that's why I am writing to you. I'm not ready to die but what can I do? A needle is a needle.

I actually wanted to write to you about more mundane matters. Everything I've written so far is probably just a diversionary tactic because I'm afraid about how you will take what follows. It's something purely practical – and if you can, try not to bring morality into it. Over the years I've saved up some money which I have now put into a bank in Bratislava in your name. Legally everything is now arranged, I am just afraid that you will refuse the money on moral grounds.
I understand your feelings but I've tried to explain to you why I've done

what I've done in this, the first and last letter I ever write to you. If you don't accept the money, I've arranged it to go to those people who raised you.

Mining coal in the dark, dust and heat of a mine is your destiny if you are truly serious about writing. And the only reward is the hope that someone will convert your coal into ash and that during long freezing nights, that person will be a little warmer.

Live as you want and must – that is my only message.

Your father.

P.S. It now occurs to me that it needn't be a scientist who discovers that ultimate, superlative formula. Perhaps it has long been hidden in a common Shakespeare quotation.

My father's letter aroused all kinds of chaotic feelings in me. After I read it, my first impulse was to put it back in the envelope and send it to the return address. But during the night, lots of ideas came into my head about all the things I could write to him. And then I suddenly realized I wouldn't be able to tell them to him in an ordinary letter even if it had a hundred pages. Instead I felt an irresistible wish to meet him. Although we had never said a word to each other, it seemed to me that we had been keeping up some kind of non-stop silent dialogue the whole time. So I had to meet him, I had to see his face, I had to touch his hand just so I could convince myself he really existed.

In the morning I looked for the return address but it was neither in the letter nor on the envelope.

Two weeks later I received a telegram: "Your father has died of a heart attack."

And that was it – again with no return address.

Excerpt translated by Jonathan Gresty

RUDOLF SLOBODA

Reason

Reason

One of the most read and most controversial Slovak novels of the last fifty years.

The everyday life that we so desperately need to adorn led the author to raise a number of troubling questions about its whole meaning. The story of a film screenwriter, a man frustrated by difficult relationships with his mother and wife, professional failures and his father's death, depicts the contradiction between reason and emotion. Freedom creates an inner space which is immediately filled with depressing dreams, clear analyses and a chaotic reality in the life of the main protagonist. We can name this inner space "solitude".

Rudolf Sloboda (1938 – 1995)

A key figure in 20th century Slovak literature, novelist, essayist, playwright and screenwriter, Rudolf Sloboda is one of those authors whose personal life and literary work are inextricably linked. His literary debut, the short story Narcis (1965), was a revolutionary event when published, a catalyst that sent fiction in Slovakia in a very new direction. Among his other work, the novel Rozum (Reason) (1982) stands out, the chaotic, aggressive and absurd environment of the film it describes reflecting the equally absurd private life of the main protagonist. Rudolf Sloboda's work is closely connected to Devínska Nová Ves, a multicultural community with a rich history situated on the Slovakia-Austria border and today a part of Bratislava.

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When I married my wife, I resolved that I would cure her completely. I was cleverer than all her doctors and would often argue with professors and try to show them that my wife's illness was something quite different from what they claimed. I felt that she needed to be in a plain, ordinary environment where she would be treated just the same as a healthy person.

While we were still living in town with my in-laws, my psychiatric experiments were doomed to failure. I had to respect my father-, mother- and brother-in-law, all of whom treated my wife with far too much consideration. It took me ten years to realize that I had to get out of there and live with her in the kind of harsh conditions Nová Ves offered. So that she would learn that if a place wasn't heated, it would be cold and if no food was cooked, we'd stay hungry.

I extended the experiment to the keeping of animals. This would teach her that human existence was nothing exceptional and that other beautiful creatures also live on this earth, creatures with animal souls capable of the same feelings as people: feelings such as love, faithfulness, perseverance, sadness and anger. I wanted to show her that nature is stronger than all

our fears, is not merely arbitrary and that we can be friends with it. Of course there is something mysterious about it but that is a part of it which our head and hands have not yet probed. There is no reason to believe that we cannot learn to understand nature.

During our stay in Nová Ves, however, living in those 'natural' conditions, I sometimes forgot what my purpose in moving there was. At other times, I doubted the effectiveness of the method. But that day she had been quarrelling with my sister, I was happy when she said: "I'm not ill at all anymore. I could see just how much your sister wanted to argue with me so I went along with it. But the whole time I wasn't really angry – I was just acting. But she really was angry and came out of it much worse than me. So I'm quite well again."

"If you're well, then go to work," I replied.

She said nothing but the next day she went to the glassworks to find out if she could start there part-time. They gave her a questionnaire to fill in. When she came home, I could see she didn't really want to go to work but I tried to look stern and indifferent to her feelings. To test her determination, I said:

"It seems you believe that Maoist nonsense about women's housework being of less value than work in a factory."

"Is that what Mao said?"

I didn't know but wanted to mention some figure of authority, though not someone too old hat. I went on:

"It will be difficult for you to get used to a new collective. And you won't earn much. You'll be lucky to get a thousand a month."

"It's enough," and she seemed to mean it.

"What will you do with the money? Do you need it?"

"I'll go to concerts and the cinema. I'll buy some new clothes and eat better."

I nodded my head. Perhaps she had become normal but I was suddenly sorry that at the same time, she had become just like other women who want nothing more than to look like models from fashion magazines, tv presenters or other such types.

I wanted to read her a passage from my father's memoirs in which he wrote about his struggles at work. But in the meantime, she had slipped out, to see one of the neighbours, perhaps.

They say a man chooses a wife just like his mother.

I, though, chose a wife like my father. When I compare his and her love and appetite for life, their desire for health and self-validation and their ambitious and aristocratic natures, they seem to be like father and daughter to me (it is generally assumed, incidentally, that there must be a close bond between father and daughter, mother and son and other family relations but my feeling is that this is often overstated and that its mythical value can be used to limit a person's freedom).

When I reflected thus on my father and wife's will to live, I realized that I was indirect witness to Kant's ethical theory, which states:

"Even if, by a special disfavour of fortune or by the niggardly provision of a stepmotherly nature, this will should wholly lack the capacity to carry out its purpose – if with its greatest efforts it should yet achieve nothing and only the good will were left (not, of course, as a mere wish but as the summoning of all means insofar as they are in our control) – then, like a jewel, it would still shine by itself, as something that has its full worth in itself. Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither add anything to this worth nor take anything away from it. Its usefulness would be, as it were, only the setting to enable us to handle it more conveniently in ordinary commerce or to attract to it the attention of those who are not yet expert enough, but not to recommend it to experts or to determine its worth."

When I read this passage, I felt giddy – as if I had quaffed a full glass of wine. I wondered though if I was drunk from its nobility of thought or from the good sense and reason in it which suddenly helped me see this will in my wife, father and ultimately myself. Modern pragmatic philosophy so influences our thinking that if we are sincere, we no longer look, even in ourselves, for pure motives behind our actions or pleasures; instead we want to find them in some mathematical formula derived from the macroworld – from geometry, physics, economics, biology. And thus we deform our relations with other people because we cannot find pure displays of good will (uninfluenced by basic forces and instincts) in them either. As we try to abstract from these pragmatic laws the absolute necessity of good will, we are again pragmatic and forget that if good will is an invention, it is stronger and more necessary than reason, which for the most part can only stutter and stammer and rarely causes much delight. And to describe reason as 'stuttering' is not just the case with individuals but also with history, with those great periods which make such a deep impression on our feelings and affect us strongly but in terms of reason, are very impractical. Hence we reject them or consider them as just some bizarre set of events in which adversarial forces come together like in a chess match. This is the parochial way many people have hitherto regarded the huge strife behind all the revolutions in the world; they look only for curiosities and are glad when they find more iniquity than goodness there. They don't look for a groundswell of strong and good will, or good but weak will underlying such revolutions. But I slightly modify Kant's ideas here by adding the attribute strong...

Since my student days, I have been wondering in this way about my motives for doing things and whether they are pure or not. Regardless of the truthfulness of Kant's deductions and how much I have actually studied them, his thoughts about the purity of good will still guide me. And so for fifteen years, since our

wedding, I think that my efforts to cure my wife have been driven by the purest of motives and my sense of duty.

Until now I have always thought that my decision to move to my father's garden in Nová Ves was dictated by my sense of duty. But my good intentions again failed a pragmatic test: it transpired that my wife didn't want to live there and went to find out if a new housing estate was going to be built in the neighbourhood. The engineer who explained the situation to her soon had a problem however: she was unable to show him on the map exactly where we lived.

Excerpt translated by Jonathan Gresty

FRANTIŠEK ŠVANTNER

Piargy

Piargy

Piargy was a tiny mountain settlement consisting of just six houses. In winter, white clouds of smoke billowed from its chimneys into the frozen sky, and on sunny summer days its little windows twinkled high into the hills around. Until that night when the Antichrist was born after an evening of merrymaking... A powerful story from the Slovak mountains with elements of lyrical prose.

At the foot of the mountains, high above the dwarf pine where the ridge's grey rocks descend into the valley, you can find a few black dots on the map indicating that there used to be human habitation there. It was a settlement of six wooden houses, called Piargy. On a fateful evening, a crowd of people gathered in the house of a woman of easy virtue. The men drank and forgot their good manners as the atmosphere thickened among the sweating dancers. Next to their noisy place of entertainment, there was a second, much quieter room in which a deaf-mute woman was giving birth, a woman said to have been in league with a wolf... The story is told by a young couple, Johanka and Kliment, who have been married for only a week and who, living in a nearby brick house, are the only people to survive the horror. From the first moment, the author of the short story hints at the tragedy that has taken place in Piargy and draws the reader into the story by building tension in a compelling, enervating manner. In his work, he blurs the differences between the human and natural world. In Piargy, natural elements become the central thrust of the plot, a kind of "hand of fate" or judge punishing the characters for their licentious behaviour. This sense of nemesis penetrates the psyche of the characters in a brilliant and suggestive way revealing the unexplored and irrational fields of their subconscious minds.

František Švantner (1912 – 1950)

Slovak prose writer František Švantner drew on themes from his life in the mountains as a child and from his years of teaching. A follower of European naturalistic trends, his prose was full of myths, mystery and balladic moments in a yet uncivilised countryside. Unlike other Slovak writers influenced by literary naturalism, he characteristically creates suspense and intensity by setting his stories at twilight or dusk in order to deceive the senses of his protagonists. The richness of language and polyphony of meaning in Švantner's work add an expressive sensibility to the mysterious harshness of the Slovak mountains. Perhaps partly because of his short life, his work is compact and concentrated, although we can observe a shift in his writing style from the mystical to the more realistic. His two collections of short stories Malka (1942) and Dáma (The Lady, 1966) and two novels Nevesta hôľ (The Bridge of a Ridge, 1946) and Život bez konca (Life Without End, 1956) are considered to be masterpieces of 20th century Slovak literature.

You can find it easily on the map. Follow the Hron upstream and at the point where the green patch ends, go left toward the brook with no name – or at least no name the mapmakers know about, though the locals have called it Belica for time immemorial. By its spring, the valley divides into two, one of the branches bending around the plump belly of Malý Roháč before winding its way into the Magurské mountains, the second running right under the peak they call Končistá. This is Piargy; a valley as straight as a pipe, speckled with clearings on both sides where animals graze. As it rises, the valley narrows into an uphill track before opening out again below the dwarf pine at a point clogged up with grey rocks that have rolled down from high up above as if to prevent curious visitors from going any further. On a detailed map you might find a few black marks scattered along the valley, each denoting a settlement of some kind. Until two years ago, the map was entirely accurate. Then there was still a tiny settlement there also called Piargy; a hamlet of just six houses. No-one knows whether the valley was named after the hamlet or the other way round because no-one knows which came first. The houses were wooden and sat facing one another on both sides of the steep brook like wild hens in cages. They weren't afraid of the solitude that looked down from Končistá, but guarded their property

carefully. Each house crouched alone, as if not trusting the others, and showed little sign of life. In the winter, light blue spirals of smoke rose from their chimneys into the frozen sky; on sunny summer days, their little window reflected sunlight into the clearings high up. Only the cottage at the bottom belonging to young Klement Pilarčík was built of stone. But that did not really belong to the hamlet because it looked out onto the world through another valley, stood on the edge of the Belčov hamlet and had a Belčov house number. Piargy ended with Magduša's barn, which stood at the end of Pilarčík's garden and belonged to the wooden cottage which stood at the foot of the mountain. Today you would search in vain for Piargy hamlet. Now there is only a valley of that name, as straight as a pipe. Every spring a foaming stream plunges down its narrow bed, the hills echo to the songs of outlaws and flocks of white bells graze on the green moss of the bank. Sometimes a wind blows down from the mountains, howling like a lunatic, catching in the branches of trees rather than plunging headlong down the slope. In the winter the valley is like a rounded trough. At the bottom, the hoarfrost glistens like gold dust and at nights wild blizzards come stampeding through it. At the lower end, the four abandoned walls of Pilarčík's cottage still stand though grey mould is eating into them. In the sun they twinkle like the skeleton of a dead animal washed clean by the rain. The top wall juts out so far, you know it will not survive another winter. Young Klement Pilarčík with his pale and pure wife, Johanka, were ordered to move out by the authorities and now live in the town.

The hamlet of Piargy no longer exists. In the space of one night it vanished from the face of the Earth as if the Devil had carried it off to hell together with all its people and animals. Only Johanka, her husband and the four walls of their cottage remain like a memento. Piargy and its inhabitants perished together. It was a terrible night.

When curious people ask the pale Johanka about that night, she still gasps in horror. Her warm, milk-filled mother's breasts

then start to quiver like frightened lambs while her eyes search for a source of comfort.

"Oh, dear people, don't ask me because it still breaks my heart to remember it," she says. "I still can't believe that such things could befall us. No one knows the day or the hour. Just this Sunday the Reverend Father was saying in his sermon that the Day of Judgement is close at hand. But I don't want it to come just yet. I'm going to have a child and we have a loan to pay on the house we've bought. Every day I thank God for protecting us that night. It was a miracle. How else can I explain it? Everyone disappeared, as if the ground had swallowed them up. Every last one of them: the Kordíks, the Roháčes, the Piestiks, Godmother from Beneath the Cherry Tree (as we all called her), Auntie Uľa, Juliša, simple Léna, flighty Magduša with her student, Beluš, the young lads and lasses, the children, cows, chickens, everybody – they all went. Only Klement and I were found alive the next day. Why us, I wonder. The people of Piargy must have sinned terribly for God to punish us so. And Godmother foretold it. That very evening she told us what to expect. Godmother, Auntie Uľa and I were sitting in the bedchamber with simple Léna; she was in labour for the second night. Godmother said that she was to blame because she had sheltered a wolf in the barn during the previous winter and had even coupled with it, so she said. In the parlour next door, her sister Magduša was carousing. Who knows if it wasn't her who brought God's wrath down on the whole community. The Piargy people were God-fearing; someone from each family would go on the pilgrimage to Štiavnica or Staré Hory. But Magduša had no shame. She wandered everywhere selling her lace and lost her virtue. She was like a fury and had cheeks bursting with good health. The whole house and everything that belonged to it were hers. Simple Léna did all the hard work while she was out making money. She was the richest housekeeper in Piargy, had enough coins to make heel taps from them and had lost all self-control. She never dreamed of marrying – God forbid! She always had as many men as she wanted – and always brought somebody home with her for the holidays to make time pass more quickly. That last time it was a student from Bystrica. The poor fellow – if he'd known he would never go back to his own, he'd not have troubled with her. But we never know when our hour will come; we're God's children and only he knows. He was still very young, his trousers hung off

him and his eyes were as dewy as if he'd been pulled out of a puddle. But Magduša was enraptured by him. She invited the whole of the hamlet to her room, heated up some homebrew and had the cripple Ferdo play his accordion so she could dance the legs off that boy. Oh, who will speak up for her before the Lord? Intercede for her, Mother of the Pilgrims! We are all sinners and helpless without your intercession."

If her husband Klement happens to be there, his forehead creases, he stands stock still and listens intently. But he cannot remain in that state for long. As soon as she stops to take breath, he begins his account:

"I sat with Beluš by the range in Magduša's room. We kept an eye on the pot of homebrew and occasionally poured ourselves shots into the square glasses Magduša had put next to us. No one had any notion of misfortune lurking. Personally I was in no mood for Magduša's dancing and homebrew; Johanka and I had only been married for a week. But I needed work. A young couple can't last for long without an income. So I went to see Beluš, because I knew that he was at home and that Magduša would not forget about him. I wanted to offer him my services. Beluš was clearcutting a strip below Končistá that winter. But you know how it is, you sit, you chew the fat and the hours soon slip by. It would have been about midnight when Beluš and I finally left."

Thus the two young Pilarčíks recall that night. And both agree that what happened to Piargy that night was an act of divine retribution.

It was the night of Carnival Sunday and the people of Piargy were all gathered at flighty Magduša's place. Only the old and infirm stayed at home and read to children from old calendars. In Magduša's room voices tinkled like the water of underground springs. On the other side of the low door, though, Johanka, Godmother and Auntie Uľa sat in the silence of Léna's bedchamber. They sat mutely. Perhaps they had nothing to speak of or their tongues were weighed down by the heavy air that filled the little room and stuck to the damp walls. Godmother sat by the stove, stretching her hands out over the hotplate where she was

heating up some oatmeal water for Léna. Although her cheeks were burning, her face was ashen; thus do old people absorb the heat. Her nose was getting sharper and it was not a good sign. Her face was like stone. Only God knows what she was mulling over. At the end of Léna's bed sat Auntie Uľa. Her head rolled with sleepiness and her eyes kept closing because it was now the second night she had been waiting for Léna's baby to be delivered. When she occasionally managed to open her eyes for a moment and take a few deep breaths, she put her hand under the eiderdown to make sure the mother-to-be had her feet placed on the warm bricks. Oh how the two women exuded such weariness, one the weariness of old age, the other the weariness of hard work! Life had taken its toll on both. But Johanka was different. She was about sixty years younger than one and forty years younger than the other; she had barely started to live. Sitting next to the pillow of the wretched Léna, she felt the weight of the cross that poor being right next to her had to bear and shuddered with fear like a child afraid of the dark:

"The poor thing – how she must suffer; she may even die," she fretted to herself. "Many have died in labour."

The petrol lamp smoked a little adding to the heavy smell of sweat coming off the invalid.

"Oh, Lord, and yesterday Klement told me that I might be with child. But I won't die – not me. It would be unfair. Klement and I have only been together for a week. What kind of life would mine have been if I was to go now and what would be left for him? No, it can't happen. We are simply not ready for it – nor will be in ten, even twenty years. I don't want to die; he loves me. Three days after the wedding, he still hadn't touched me, just kept his distance and gazed at me. He was as courteous as a knight in a fairy tale or a princess's page and would lower his eyes and blush if I looked at him sternly. I was starting to think he'd always be like that. But on the third night I woke up from a dream in which I was being covered by hawthorn blossom. The smell of the blossom was smothering me; I'd have suffocated if I hadn't woken up. But it wasn't that; it was just his hand stroking

my hair. 'Don't stir from your sleep, Johanka, don't. I had to move my arm because it was so warm', he said and his voice quivered like a spring breeze above a coppice. But his hand stayed where it was and I closed my eyes again because I felt good. And then his hand slipped down on to my naked shoulder. I didn't want to push it away because I was afraid of embarrassing him – though I was embarrassed myself. Klement was rather timid and always asked for permission to do something. He said: 'Can I squeeze up to you a little?' And then he said, when I felt him next to me: 'I'll kiss you on the shoulder – if I may?' He lay as quiet as a fish next to me moving only his toes. And then he suddenly acted and was like a stag as he thrust his hand beneath my wing bones. He was as strong as an ox, taut like a steel string; I was rather frightened of him, indeed I was. But he said: 'Let's close our eyes so we don't have to look at one another.' Oh but I wouldn't have looked anyway. And he said: 'Now just lie there quietly and I will kiss you but I don't know where because I can't see anything'. I was afraid but nothing happened. Klement was kind and tender. I love him more than I did a week ago, much more. I'm no longer intimidated. Sometimes I kiss him because I crave his mouth, so soft and warm, like a fragrant cushion heated up by the afternoon sun. I would like to bite him but I am shy and wouldn't want anyone to see the bite. One day I will muster up the courage, though. Yes, I will bite him in a place where it won't be visible.

Her eyes filled with warm desire. She could barely make out the dark figures of the other women, sitting as silent as moss-covered rocks.

That was about an hour before the horror which was to engulf the whole hamlet. Its inhabitants could still have saved themselves had they known what was coming. But God had muddled their brains. They were incapable of thinking of their imminent death because their tongues were burning with their appetite for life.

Magduša's room was brimming with noise and life but here in the bedchamber light sleep was fluttering from one person to

another. Johanka sat watching it, how sometimes it hovered above the bed soothing Léna's pains before fanning the tired head of Auntie Ul'a. But it stayed away from Godmother, doubtless afraid to go there because of her stern expression. Johanka often claims that Godmother already knew everything. And she is right. The old woman was fast approaching her end and God often grants such people powers of prophecy because he knows they will not use them to subvert their own fate.
For a long time she gave no sign of life, neither moved nor spoke. Johanka thought she may be sleeping with her eyes open. And then she started to wag the fingers of one of her hands and said:

"God will punish us for this."

She must certainly have been thinking about the frenzied hubbub coming from the other side of the wall but Johanka did not understand at first; the veil of desire was still drawn over her eyelashes, clouding her memory. As she shook herself out of her reverie, she noticed Auntie Ul'a also sit up and start to listen. Godmother didn't stop moving her fingers and her eyes took on a strange glassy expression as if she was looking into an illuminated mirror...

She said:

"Misfortune will not pass us by – it is written in the Gospels. The seventh angel will appear between the stars, blow his trumpet and loud voices will sound on Heaven and Earth. But before these things come to pass, the Antichrist will be born of a sinful woman. He will look like our children but have hairs all over his body like a goat, – she said, turning to Auntie Uli slowly and carefully as if her neck was cramped."

Johanka listened in wide-eyed. She had no idea that a woman could give birth to such a monster. And now that she knew, she resolved only ever to look at pretty children so that she would never bear such a child herself.

Godmother continued:

"Our good Lord will not let him rule for very long. He will be snuffed out as soon as his eyes open, but that will not save us. His poisonous breath will spill everywhere and flood the whole Earth.

And it will be the end of the world; sinners will have no time in which to repent."

Breathless, she gasped for air before settling her eyes on Johanka's pale face.

"Oh God forbid she knows of my sin!" fretted Johanka, her face flushing from ear to ear.

But Godmother merely raised her eyes so that she could better recall the passage from the Bible describing the terrible day.

"There will be a great earthquake," she said. Her voice had acquired a mysterious prophetic power.

"The Earth will burst open like ill-leavened bread in a heated oven. The pits will be bottomless and no one once swallowed up by them will ever see the light of day again. The sun will turn as black as rotten fruit in hay and not appear in the sky because it will have no one to light up. Some will die of terror, others will throttle each other. The moon will turn to blood and the stars fall into the sea.

Night will merge with day and those who still have eyes will go blind from the great darkness. Everything will move from its place. Mountains will open and spew out rocks from within. Graves will burst open and the dead come to parley with the living. Water will rise up from the depths of the ocean and flood the Earth while the sky will crumple like paper. Woe betide those whom God punishes."

She went quiet for a moment and then waved her left arm in the manner of a dying spider.

Johanka fretted. She did not wish to stay in that bedchamber for much longer and decided she would suggest to Klement they move out of Piargy as soon as possible. He had said he could find work more easily in town. Why tarry there any longer? They would go – it wasn't too late and in town they had a better chance to survive such horrors than here in Piargy where those monstrous peaks towered over them on all sides. If they were to come crashing down they would have nowhere to hide.

"And this time will soon come because all the signs in the heavens point to it," added Godmother but her voice was

drowned out by a door opening on the other side and noise filling the anteroom, getting louder like a drunken shepherd.
It was wild and untrammelled, sometimes whooping like a wind raging in a fir tree that has blocked its passage. Men's and women's voices all merged into one cacophony, one tangled bundle of noise, only occasionally surpassed by the wheezing of crippled Ferdo's accordion. Then it was like the sound of a huge creaky gate being opened. And the frenzy went on twisting and raging with neither limits nor laws, hurtling somewhere relentlessly taking hills and clouds with. Nothing was sacred to it.

"Ferdo, this one," roared a powerful male voice singing: 'No one knows how it hurts'. – But the accordion could not compete with his sound.
And immediately afterwards:

And now you men sing: 'I'll not go to see her' – And the men's voices boomed as if the sea was rising up, or as if a dozen wild bison were lifting their black heads, parting their jaws and bellowing at a herd of grazing cows. And as soon as the last notes had echoed deafly off the wooden walls, a woman burst into song: 'Why do you play so hard to get....?'

It was Magduša. Everyone recognized her steely voice. The other girls joined in with her while the men howled demonically.

"They almost went completely mad in that room," said young Pilarčík. "The Devil only knows whether there wasn't some evil herb in that homebrew or – whether he wasn't actually tormenting us himself." The young people went wild – whooping and shrieking without inhibition. Some were singing one song, the rest another; and each group was trying to outsing the other. The older people there didn't want to interfere. It is not worth locking horns with youngsters at such times – they will immediately make fun of you. Everyone was doing their own thing, without restraint or shame. The girls were trying to outdrink the boys and Magduša led the way. She showed the girls how to drink and the young men how to dance. No one could keep up with her. It was as if the Devil had possessed her. She was swinging her fancy man about the place like a ragdoll. I still can't understand why she chose

such a milksop. I know that a woman is only proud when she has a real man alongside her. That one, though, wore the trousers and braces of a five-year-old. His hair was all smoothed down and shiny as if he'd put syrup on it; his little face was pink and girlish with no hairs under his nose or on his chin. There was no meat on him at all; a poor weakling he was. He had big eyes but he was no match for her and a real woman would have had nothing to do with him. But Magduša couldn't keep her eyes off him. She stroked his chin and smacked her lips and when no one was looking, she stuffed her hands up his shirt. God is now judging her in the other world; let her answer herself for her sins. I can only say that she rarely had rosary beads in her hand and hardly ever entered a church. As I said, Beluš and I sat by the stove heating up our throats with homebrew. We had our own business and had no great wish to watch those tearaways raising Cain. Beluš said that there was money to be earned but you had to be careful of avalanches because fresh snow had fallen up at Končistá on the old layer; now it was getting warmer, it could easily start sliding downward; his strip was right on the edge of the gully below Končistá. But I couldn't be put off by such a thing; I needed money like salt. As soon as he had promised me work, we shook hands on it and drank to our good fortune. And then there was nothing else for me to do there. Beluš and I got up together to leave. I called to my wife but she was busy with the birth in Léna's bedchamber. It was a clear night, the sky as clear as an eye. At the gate, Beluš told me not to be late the next morning because he had men up there from the other side who took their things up on Sunday afternoon; he would go straight there – the walk would clear his head. I promised that I wouldn't keep him waiting. He smiled under his moustache, taking me for the kind of man who would rather stay in bed with his wife of a morning. I couldn't blame him – Johanka and I had hardly had time to get to know each other. But he needn't have worried; I always keep my word. And then we shook hands again. He went up and I went down. It was our last goodbye. He perished with the rest and I got out alive. He was a fine figure of a man – such

a pity! I went down the path to my house. As I said, it was a clear and still night. When I was at my door, though, I had the feeling that someone had run down behind me and hidden by Magduša's barn. I couldn't be bothered to chase him away. I just thought it was one of those drunk milksops. So I went into the house, took a hunk of fatback from the chimney and cut off a thick slice so that my wife wouldn't have to do it in the morning. I didn't light a candle – the white of the snow came in through the window. I took my shoes off, got undressed and was just about to clamber into bed when it happened. First I heard a terrible roar as if a thousand people were burning in the flames of hell. And then the door flew open, my wife ran in and flung herself into my arms with a scream. I didn't know if the house was on fire or if the ground was opening up beneath us.

When Klement left, Johanka could not follow him because at that very moment Léna started getting contractions and Auntie Uľa detained her:

"Stay a while – you can help me. I'd be hard pressed on my own."

She hesitated. Something made her long to be with Klement but she dared not refuse. So she stayed even though she felt waves of fear passing through her.

And it was soon obvious that the delivery would be a difficult one. Léna was so exhausted because she was in labour for a second night and now there were external signs.

"No space for even two fingers and her belly has fallen down between her thighs," said Auntie Uľa, "and there is always trouble with such women."

And then she added:

"If it was only a small baby – but there is no hope of that. She has grown so large."

And finally she said:

"Everything is in God's hands."

Léna started to groan more loudly. Her eyes were yellow and bloodshot and wandered wildly around the room as if looking for someone. Her face would occasionally crease up like a dried pear.

And she would go red and then purple like chopped wood catching fire. But then she'd go pale again, lose all colour and freeze like a corpse. And her large body would start writhing again. She could not get comfortable under the eiderdown and would thrust her whole fist into her mouth and gnaw at her knuckles; at other times she'd beat the eiderdown with both her fists.

"There is some oatmeal soaking in that clay pot on the oven," said Uľa, rolling her sleeves up, "dip your finger in to make sure it's not too hot then give her some to drink."

The woman showed no sign of consternation. While dozing on the stool, she had seemed very meek and remote but when she awoke, her face suffused with colour and the room was filled with a sense of safety and trust. Nothing could surprise or confuse her; she was prepared for anything and all of her movements were performed with the same address. Léna drank greedily with deep gulps. She was so thirsty, the yellowish fluid trickled down her chin. When she settled back in bed again, she seemed more peaceful.

"You see how thirsty she was."

"Her body's on fire."

And then a door again opened on the other side. There was a burst of laughter which immediately went quiet. In the anteroom was the sound of whispering:

"Let's not wait anymore." All right.

"There are people everywhere."

"Where should we go?"

"Down to the barn."

"In the cold?"

"Oh, it's never cold in there. The cows' breath keeps the place warm."

"Fair enough!"

"You go on ahead, I'll be right behind. I'll just put on a shawl."

The floor creaked. Someone hurried out and Magduša burst into the bedchamber. Her face was burning like a torch, her dress, tapered at the waist, accentuated her woman's curves and her

coat was tight around her chest but she acted as if nothing could discomfit her. She was animated, strutting around in those delicated little boots of hers though they didn't suit her. Her good living had left all parts of her rounded in the flesh. When she smirked, she had a double chin.

"So how is she?" she asked – as if she actually cared.

She came up to Léna's bed and looked very humble.

"I just hope she's up and about soon. I'm leaving tomorrow. Those cows will need looking after."

"Hard to say, my girl," replied Godmother in a hostile voice.

Magduša hesitated.

"I'll go and have a look in the barn. Oklamka is going to calve one of these days," she said , wrapping the shawl around her head.

And Godmother:

"Don't come to any harm. Your face is burning."

"I'll be all right."

And thus Magduša went out from this world.

In the anteroom the sound of the heel taps on her boots drowned out the other noises before fading away forever as she went outside. Oh Magda, Magduša, where are you hiding? People are waiting for you out there because you promised to bring them new lace of the most delicate design, the kind you rarely sell. Where are you, you merry little spirit? Your laughter was always infectious, gambolling like a goat in pasture, startling the men who heard it. Who can we ask about you? Where have you disappeared to – you left no trace behind you? Magda, Magduša! Have you really passed into eternity? We only saw you a short time ago. Your pinkish blouse still dances before our eyes. On top you would wear your pale blue print apron. And when you unbuttoned your coat in front of us, under the blouse your breasts would quiver restlessly as you took out a red purse from between them. How familiar it all is to us. Our eyes are still warm from looking at you; we can still smell your presence. Come out from where you're hiding! Magduša!

All in vain. She doesn't come out or even make a sound. There will be no rustle of her skirt, no squeak from her boots. Not anymore.

She has gone forever! It was Carnival Sunday. In the evening she laughed and sang and then she went out into the night – the white of the snow was rising up on all sides. The dawn of the new day came too late to revive her.

Johanka recalled her flushed face but had no time to reflect on her leavetaking because Léna then started to howl.

"Let's sit her up in bed," said Auntie Ul'a.

"But first pull up her shirt."

She had a large body.

"Hold her from behind by the shoulders."

Auntie Ul'a rubbed lard into her hands and then knelt down between Léna's legs.

Johanka could have cried from shame. She was not used to nakedness so close up. She half-closed her eyes and tried to stop her hands from trembling so much.

Léna's body, pouring with sweat, was hot and sticky. When Johanka pressed up to it, her dress was quickly soaked. Léna was writhing on her sides. It was there she had the worst pains.

"Get onto the bed with her and hold down her arms."

Johanka knelt down next to her and placed her hands around the other woman's upper arms.

"Not like that. Apply your body weight and press your chin down on her forehead; let her look at you but be careful that she doesn't bite. Grab her below her armpits, your palms against her sides. Press your elbows towards each other and keep your fingers away from her body."

Léna fought back with greater strength than they thought her capable of; Johanka had to struggle very hard to restrain her. First she tried to pin down her arms then she pressed up close to her so that she could anticipate her movements. She felt every spasm passing through her. They always started somewhere beneath her ribs and radiated out to her sides before moving jerkily downwards to between her thighs.

"Hold on tight and slide your hands forwards to her front."

Her arms were aching.

"From the front or the back?"

Johanka scrunched up her eyes because it was dragging on for so long. Her head was spinning and she could see bloody rings around her. She tried to keep her balance but she was losing faith in her own strength as Léna rose up like a volcano in which unseen force had been stored up for years. She'd stopped howling now but was puffing and blowing and fulminating. And her body was burning and bones slipping out of their joints, popping like a fir tree on fire. She tried to free her hands, seething with rage when she realized she couldn't. She bared her teeth and hissed in her desperation to grab hold of something.

"Will I survive this?" Johanka asked herself. "God, just let me survive! Oh I still have some strength to draw on. I will bite my lip until the blood starts to flow but will not let go. I cannot, Léna, do you see? I can't die yet but you may if that's how it's to be. I've never wished you any evil but if one of us has to go, it won't be me. You're deaf and dumb. You can't have much pleasure from this world. Klement is at home waiting for me and if I don't come... God, what would he do if I didn't go back to him?"

Fear took hold of her. Her temples were moist with sweat. Her body trembled, her throat was gripped with anxiety but she was determined to fight on. Then suddenly all resistance ended, as if a door she was leaning against had fallen in; as if a bladder she herself had blown up had burst between her fingers. And it happened so suddenly, her first impression was that she had been destroyed. She felt three sharp convulsions pass through Léna's body but didn't give them much thought. But when the strongest pressure on her arms had subsided, she started to panic like a galloping horse who has accidentally caught a playful child under its hooves.

She bided her time. Léna's body had gone suspiciously quiet. Perhaps she wanted to trick or surprise her. She had frozen; her muscles were relaxed and she had stopped breathing. She did not move a finger. On the outside, she showed no sign of life, had

turned as lifeless as a mummy. But she was laughing inside. Under her lowered eyelashes two bright eyes were doubtless forging plans, waiting for the right moment. Don't be fooled by her!

So Johanka went on waiting. Léna's body lay motionless. A few moments before there wasn't a square inch of her that was still. Her skin was taut, her joints cracking, her muscles constricting each other; a wild foam was bubbling inside her. It was a terrible storm which had raged. And then it all went quiet. Yes. A hamlet goes quiet like that when the first snow falls. Until yesterday mice still scampered across the ground, lumps of earth yielding under their weight and crumbling into the dry grass. Leaves had rustled when a bird hopped around beneath the trees and water deep down in wells had still babbled, but now it was silent. The snow had not softened enough to slide off the branches yet. When you breathe, you hear your breath but nothing more. The ground hardens and the air is coated with frost. Léna's body was like a hamlet covered by the first snow. It had hardened and become coated with frost.

Johanka remained doubtful though she now had little reason to. She moved her hands gingerly upwards. Little pieces of skin flaked off beneath her touch. In places it was rough, in others as smooth as velvet. But all these places were getting unpleasantly cold. Soon she was by the mound of her breasts where Johanka's finger slid along her left rib. She listened.

Silence! Nothing could be heard! The vein was not pulsating. The blood of life had drained out of her. You could press your ear to her flesh but still wouldn't hear the faintest sound. Silence!

Johanka goes weak at the limbs. Even now when she recalls that moment, she turns pale and puts her hands to her womb, protecting the life she carries there from the horror of that evening.

"Oh I always get so scared out in the street in the evening when there are people wandering around and the cold is biting. Or when Klement tosses and turns in his sleep. As if it were coming

back. Oh Lord! She was already with her maker. Her heart must have burst from so much pain and effort. And I went on holding her. I'll remember that sight for the rest of my life. I wanted to jump out of the window because I felt I was to blame! If I hadn't kept a grip on myself, I would have gone completely mad because as soon as I was on my feet again and trying to get over the first shock, there came a second even greater one: at that moment Auntie Uľa was holding Léna's baby in her hands. It wasn't bigger than a tomcat and was covered in little hairs like a goat. I thought I'd pass out. Godmother was covering her face with both hands and squeaking like a trapped mouse: Oh Lord, deliver us from such evil! It's a mercy that baby isn't still amongst us because it was a fright to look at. But Godmother was right. It didn't live for long; I even think Auntie Uľa brought it stillborn into the world. It must have suffocated in Léna's body before having chance to breathe its power in God's world and destroy everything it was meant to. In the end the dark forces that night destroyed only the people of Piargy before God commanded them to stop.

I don't know what those two women could have been doing there after she died. I ran after Klement. If God was going to punish us like that, I at least wanted to die with him. But God spared us. Here we are with you, alive and well. Klement has found work on the railway – every month he brings money home. And I'm now in my eighth month. If our luck holds out, we'll have a child. Perhaps it will be a boy. I'd be glad if he took after his father."

When Johanka ran outside, she first looked up at the stars in the sky. Above her head stretched the Great Wagon with its wheels and crooked pole. To the right the Seven Sisters were shimmering. She didn't know the names of the others but they were all in their usual place. Not one looked as if it was about to fall into the sea. They looked down at her peacefully as they had the day before and the day before that. The sky was also firmly settled in between the peaks.

That reassured her a little. She breathed in the fresh mountain air with its taste of spring water; although it was cold, it roused her from her stupor. She wiped her forehead with her hand to chase away the dark thoughts within and was about to walk down the path to her cottage. But instead she turned to look around her. What was it?

The path led uphill, up to the wooden cottages. The lowest, conspicuously black, was the Roháčes'; the other cottages followed upwards at regular intervals. In the day they too were black, partly because of age. Now, in winter, they looked black both by day and night what with all the snow alongside. They were buried up to the windows and folds of snow hung down from their roofs like a coat of precious ermine. The snow was firm because several layers had been compressed; the coat would only start to moult at the end of March when the first warm winds began to blow up from the lowlands. But the cottages didn't mind the snow.The same amount again may fall – why shouldn't it? It wouldn't harm nor restrict anybody; the people there lived different lives from those who need the light and space of the outside world. They had all that they needed and didn't have to be connected to the outside world. The path which went up and past all their gates was barely wide enough for two boots. But it suited everybody living there.

There was nothing on the path and the wooden cottages were standing there in humble silence.

It must have come from higher up.

The valley gets very narrow up there – like a chute you send timber sliding down. You could hardly see it because it was so white on all sides. You would expect that somewhere in that white sea, the blackness of an old spruce would be jutting out. But no. There were two-year-old saplings up there but all were buried under the snow.

But it hadn't come from there.

It must have come from Končistá.

You could see it silhouetted against the sky. The stars were shimmering in their thousands around its head but it was buried

in its own shadow like a mysterious woman in black veils. It was not moving but it could not be trusted.

Johanka stood uncertainly in front of Magduša's house. She dared not move because she trusted her senses.

There was first a deep roaring sound. If she could only liken it to something! But what? There are no sounds similar. The wind is louder and always echoes because it is open on all sides; this sound was muffled though, as if trapped inside an enormous sack. Water babbles and over its hubbub you can easily recognize the crashing of waves but this was just one deep rumble. It was neither water nor wind making the noise. And when everything around was still, what could it possibly be? If it had lasted only a moment, you might have thought you were imagining things but then it was followed by sounds that were very easy to identify. Somewhere, the forest was breaking. Needles were whistling, roots snapping, branches cracking and wood banging. The din grew louder and wilder, then groaned and went quiet, as if the whole strip of forest had flown down into the huge basin.

"Is it you, Johanka?" a soft voice piped up behind Johanka. It was Juliša, Johanka's peer. Two years earlier she was going to marry the youngest of the Roháč boys. But a month before the wedding he had to go for military exercises where he shot himself in the mouth in front of his friends. They brought him home without his head. Juliša had been through turmoil. The life had gone from her; she sometimes bled. She walked as slowly and silently as death. Johanka had embroidered her a tablecloth as an act of condolence.

"Did you hear it?" – "Yes."

"Something is breaking up there." – "Yes."

"And the sky is clear. There's not so much as a breeze."

Nothing.

"Are you going to your husband?"

"I am."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

The door creaked and the silence returned.

Johanka carried on a few steps but again had to stop. Again the sound came from behind her.

The noise had changed. Now it was as if someone was breathing through a rocky gap. The breath went in one direction and carried cold air with it. It started to be cold.

But what could it possibly be?

A white sea rose up to the sky. And the breathing did not stop but got louder as if the gap was widening or the person breathing harder – or getting closer and growling.

Johanka stopped her own breathing to work out where this other breath was coming from. It wasn't from underground; the earth wasn't moving. Wide-eyed, she stared ahead of her. There was a deep cracking noise, the sound of a beast biting into a rock while chewing. It was not far off. Jesus! It was getting closer.

It was then she was overcome by a fatal dread. And she tarried no longer but started to run down to her house as fast as she could. As if it had been waiting for this very moment, the mysterious noise redoubled and filled the valley. Now it was snapping at her heels, coming down from above, sliding down from all sides. It was all around her and getting stronger. She was desperate to evade it; she would not die without Klement. She was by the door when she heard the hellish shrieking of the others which he too had heard. She glanced back at Magduša's cottage but could see nothing because her eyes were filled with tears.

"Klement!" – she shrieked, slamming the door shut.

"Klement!"

He stood by the bed all in white waiting to take her in his arms.

"Klement!"

It was then that it struck their house. The walls moved as if they were going to cave inwards and crush them both. Plaster rained down, a joist cracked and somewhere the roof broke in two.

"Klement!"

She buried her face in his chest as if it were her final refuge. And then she went quiet because she had no strength left.

We lost a portion of our life because we were sleeping – and how deeply we slept! If someone had cut us open in our sleep, we would not have felt the life draining out of us. How easily and painlessly we could have slipped into the next world! A person crosses a boundary, nobody stops them and they are beyond recall. Who knows when you will take that fateful step? Tell me! Nobody! Or perhaps there is no boundary and no fateful steps and not two worlds at all. Instead everything is just one continuum, one long road which you pass along. And as you go, you meet people and you greet them nicely. Some are going in the opposite direction, some your way. You leave them behind because you are in a hurry. They get smaller and smaller behind you. You can still recognize them in the distance if you put your hand to your eyes but there is no time. You could wait and they would quickly appear on the horizon but no. You still have a long journey ahead of you and must press on. A big distance comes between you and you disappear from each other's view. And then you meet new people. So when was it we crossed that boundary, when took that fateful step? Oh, who can attend to such things. We have no way of finding out where we are. Wait. Our dreams are confusing us. Let's try to remember: we fled because something was chasing us. And he stood opposite us in the whiteness and wanted to shelter us in his arms but we somehow drifted apart and out of each other's sight. That's how it was. We lost a portion of life but are regaining consciousness. And now we can feel the quilt on top of us, covering us up to our chin. We have a hand on our bosom and now realize our breathing is calm and regular. Our chest is moving, our breasts tremulous and warm as if the milk was simmering within. If we want, we can open our eyes. We can. It's not difficult. So we are in bed in our own room. Nothing has changed. The candle is burning. All corners of the room are visible. Near the door is the step leading to the toolshed. The trapdoor is open. Perhaps there is somebody up there. But there is something I don't understand: under the step are two people lying on the ground – a man and a woman

stark naked. You can't see his face because he is turned towards her and seems to be biting into her throat.She probably feels no pain because she is laughing, her teeth shining like a row of candles by a grave. But Lord, how strange her laughter is, inaudible as if she were choking. But no! They are dead! All the time I've been looking at them, they haven't stirred a muscle although at first sight it seemed they were wrestling one another. Oh, Mother of God, where have we wandered to? Have we really crossed into another world? And can we remember when? But wait! Someone else is coming up the steps. Let's just keep half an eye open so that our surprise is not too great. A man staggers into the room looking as if he has been wading through snow. But his face is looking for us. He has light-blue eyes, as clear as a well between two white rocks, and a troubled mouth. Oh, we know that mouth. We can still feel its thirst on our lips. It forms a smile, as warm as a sunbeam flying towards us. Oh we can't resist it. It kisses our cheeks and settles on our eyelashes, rousing our blood. Oh, how good it is to be with him. Let's open our eyes so that we can see him better. "Klement"

He's alive. And so are we.

"Klement"

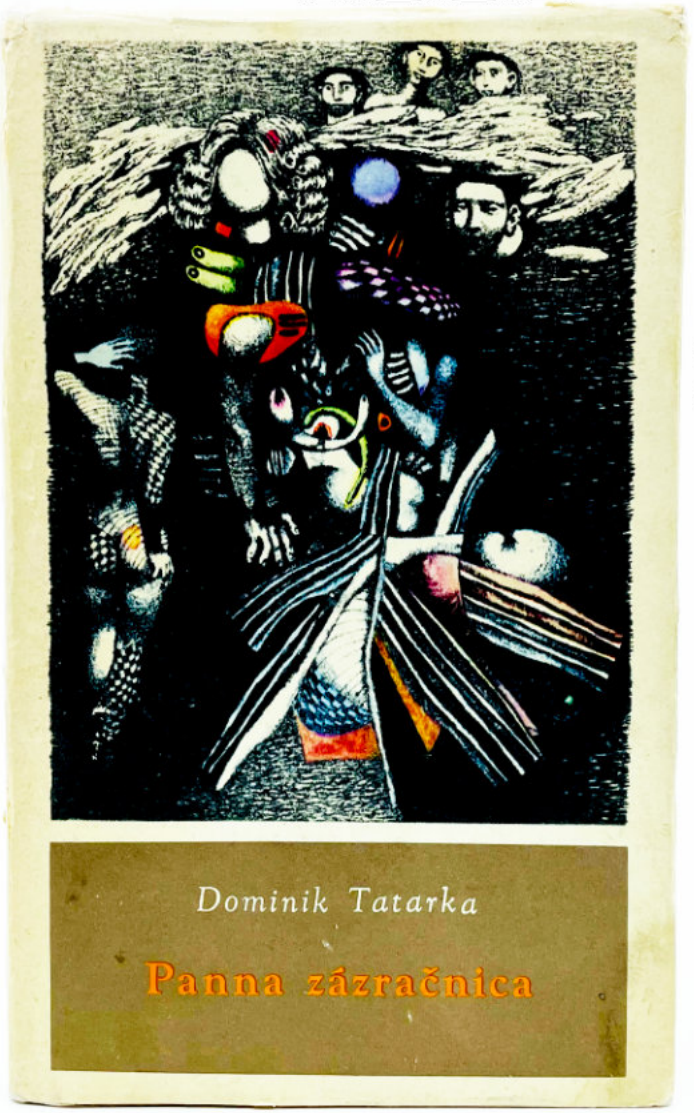
He said:

"It has completely surrounded us. They're all out there and only we have survived. I pulled those two out from under a beam; their legs were jutting out of the snow."

Excerpt translated by Jonathan Gresty

DOMINIK TATARKA

The Miraculous Virgin



The Miraculous Virgin

Anabella. An ephemeral, miraculous, inspiring femme fatale. Real and at the same time only a dream; alive and dead; belonging to everyone and yet to no-one; a ballad that became the basis for one of Slovakia's films.

A group of Bratislava artists during World War II spend their time in aimless debates and bohemian living – until, that is, Anabella, the miraculous virgin, enters their world. She gets off the train at the main station and, in the commotion caused by the sirens wailing, puts her hand in that of the painter Tristan. They take cover together in a shelter and survive the raid; later, enchanted by her beauty, Tristan introduces her to his friends. Anabella decides to play a game with the group of artists: firing their imagination and becoming their muse and femme fatale, she decides that she will belong to all and yet none of them. In an effort to win her over, the young artists compete in courtship, which makes them forget about the life around and the reality of war, and thus they escape into a world of fantasy and creative obsession. Because of her, Tristan even throws himself into the Danube in front of his friends. However, Anabella herself remains incomprehensible and shrouded in mystery for both the group of artists as well as the reader. The rivalry and jealousy in the group of friends finally inspires her to disappear for a while and play a trick on them. With the help of the sculptor Harvan, she sends them plaster replicas of her death mask. By faking her death, Anabella fulfils her role. The poets write poems, the painters paint their paintings and sculptors shape stone. Anabella remains elusive; she remains only a desire.

Dominik Tatarka (1919 – 1989)

An icon of Slovak literature and leading writer of the second half of the 20th century, he spent the last two decades of his life persecuted by the regime and excluded from public life, his book all withdrawn from libraries. In 1968, he opposed the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, and was one of few Slovaks to sign Charter 77 in 1977. He maintained strong contacts with the dissident movement, published his writings in samizdat form (at Sixty-Eight Publishers in Toronto), translated works from French (Alfred de Musset, Guy de Maupassant etc.) and wrote several screenplays. In 1986, he became the first winner of the Jaroslav Seifert Prize, awarded by the Charter 77 Foundation in Stockholm. Despite his critical tone, the main theme of Tatarka's prose is the search for an ideal world suffused with love and understanding. Marked by suprealism, and the rejection of schematism and ideological negativism, his works present both his personal experiences as well as insight into social and individual problems. He made his debut with a collection of short stories titled V úzkosti hľadania (The Anxiety of Exploration) (1942) and drew on the time he spent in Paris studying at the Sorbonne in his novella Prútené kreslá (Wicker armchairs) (1963). His novel Démon súhlasu (The Demon of Consent) (1963) was a satirical attack on totalitarian power which revealed the dishonest practices of the then regime and had a major influence on the democratization of contemporary Slovak literature. He was constantly persecuted by the ŠTB (State Security) right up to his death in 1989.

Personal fibres torn, air supplies empty, shells depopulated, paralysed in activity, disconsolate in inactivity, with a morbid desire to disintegrate, quit, give up and die, Anabella despaired when her task came to repopulate a new space, a deserted city. At first, she was provoked only by a young fellow whom she tried to decode somehow in the bowels of the earth. It excited her what he had invented about her, as did those who had taken part in his invention.

She let herself be lured out of her reserves of lethargy, to taste what it was that he was inventing. Thus, she started with Tristan.

She slipped into his atelier resolutely. It was second nature for her to sit down without being invited, to look at his larger-than-life pictures and every object surrounding him in a moment of artistic frenzy, as she guessed. Although it was a sad place, chaotically whimsical and unconventional, she tried to take in every single thing in it.

She could look around now that he was not looking at her. He was painting some old man´s atrophied head; he was infinitely patient at work.

His tone was natural and spontaneous as he spoke to her from behind the easel.

"Anabella, there´s a map with pictures in the corner."

She responded after a long while as if under the influence of drugs.

"Peter, why do they call you Tristan?"

"I don't know. It seems to me that each of us plays our own role separately, anonymously for oneself."

At first, she had felt encouraged by what he was making of her. As soon as she entered, though, the whirlwind of her arrival was stilled. She forgot herself and was interested only in the here-and-now. Tristan could feel her presence, how she breathed with him and all the junk accumulated in his atelier, how its walls breathed.

She had been familiar to Tristan in his imaginings. But in the atelier she became natural, melting into it as if she could not be separated from the other things in there. She lost her personality and could identify with every object. First it was the carpet and the satin fabric; then, before he had noticed, everything was suffused with her presence.

Satisfied, she made an attempt to secretly get to know the others from the set. An intimate, immediate mental acquaintance with Tristan was her impetus.

She discovered an adorable game:

With Tristan, she was loftily deviant – an element meant to be breathed.

With Vnuk, she was electric in the darkness; they played with sparks.

With Vratko, she was a red thread for wandering round the rooms. They played by merging their childhood adventures.

With Uhor, she had to be atavistic, distant, most of the time the tip of the Île de Seine stretching out farther into another element.

With Kadanec, she touched strangers with her antennae and together they played their panopticon games.

With young Bunt she was natural, a still life with grapes or a vase. They would stand on deserted street corners together.

With the old man who got randomly caught on her red thread she was a granddaughter peeking out from behind a curtain or through a peephole. With him, old age terrified her.

The others were ordinary, conventional. The kind of people to meet in a café sitting at the next table and nod one's head at.

When Tristan turned out not to be jealous, she implicitly

revealed the secret of her visits to him. He even learned, most importantly of all, about her notebook, which included her schedule of future visits and her notes about events and individuals.

Tristan just smiled at her pretending to be a governess of talents because he really was not jealous. At least not yet. Besides, he could tell her the most fantastical nonsense during his breaks at work and she, infuriated, stopped reasoning.

"If you were to get lost, Anabella, I would go mad or would just suffocate. To me, the air seems breathable only with you."

"Anabella, you know that if I could save you for myself somehow, I would offer you

my eternal friendship. But that´s silly. I won't. You know, I am happy to dream my parting with pleasure. I imagine that you will disappear, evaporate one day like an essence from a vial. Suffocating, I will turn blue in my longing for you, Anabella."

"Anabella, you cannot be mine nor anybody's. No one can find satisfaction by your

side. You are as naughty as the air."

"Close your eyes, Anabella."

She did as he said to her believing a new game was about to begin.

Tristan ran out but a moment later was standing in front of her again bowing woodenly, rather like a puppet and a great lover in one, dressed up as she had wished him to be a few days before. He looked nice but ridiculous, just like a circus clown.

He handed her a beautiful bouquet of roses worthy of a lady. Suppressing her shyness of a moment, she accepted it with a trained smile and a bow; and again she was head over heels in love.

Durdík, as if in a moment of inspiration and perfect self-control, dressed up without haste. He carefully chose an old, well-preserved carriage from the Václavík catalogue. To contradict the reality as boldly as possible, he had a mare harnessed. (The mare was not quite like the circus ponies in his dream circus, neither

melancholic nor thin enough.) But it had a crest, and tassels and rattles were woven into its mane. It was almost like the wooden pony on which he had swayed in the park as a boy.

They came down to the yard. The horse-drawn carriage was waiting at the platform.

"Anabella, he addressed her solemnly, we have a pony,
rattles, and a carriage. You,
my beautiful, need a little bit of courage to think up the rest. At your instruction, it will take us wherever you wish."

"Beware, beautiful Anabella, we are embarking on a crazy adventure, he warned her artistically."

Anabella got on and seated herself, enchanted. At first, her eyes were narrowed with tension. They passed through a booming tunnel to reach the other side. Anabella´s shyness lasted only for a while. Delighted, Tristan thought himself Almighty as it was all just as he had conceived, even the shape of the mare and carriage. The mare stepped forward and trotted. The wheels were indeed rattling on the pavement, the rattles were jingling at every jump.

Entering the magical circle, they seated themselves comfortably in their seats and felt quite at home. Only now did the world begin to vanish from their imagination. As soon as they came out of the tunnel, Anabella opened her grey eyes as wide as she could. The carriage bounced its way out of town with a rattling sound. As they flew down the road, there was a steep hill on their left side, a quiet valley on the right. They leaned out, above the bank on Tristan's side of the carriage, and listened to the tinkling sound in the valley below; a mountain park lay high above them. With a joyous surprise, Tristan was even thinking instead of Anabella. There were charming meadows with trees and makeshift bushes - all for them to enjoy. They made it all up with ease.

They turned back towards a garden from a great distance. They made a beautiful detour and stopped in the middle of a huge green meadow. The coachman unhitched the mare and let her run into the meadow. It was a bit hilarious – such a small pony in such a large area of green. He was ordered not to fall asleep - God forbid! In a moment of distraction, the pony could transform itself

into a fine steed and run away through the hills, up the river.

Anabella, there is a garden in front of us, a magical park. Its beauty will multiply when we enter it from behind the fence through the entrance I have discovered. Will you stroke the tree bark? Will you?

At every step, he was making up for her so much that was miraculous!

Excerpt translated by Jonathan Gresty

BOŽENA SLANČÍKOVÁ TIMRAVA

The Ťapáks

The Ťapáks

Through her characters, she depicts the backwardness of rural society and the problems of real people's fates. The title of the novella Ťapákovci (The Ťapáks) (1914) has become synonymous in Slovakia with the stale conservatism and apathy of rural life.

Before writing Ťapákovci, the author had been active as a writer for nearly thirty years, with poems and short prose works of hers published in newspapers and magazines both in Slovakia and in Slovak publications in the USA. As a mature writer, she depicts in Ťapákovci certain inhabitants of the village in which she lived, displaying great psychological insight and incurring the anger and hatred of some of her local community for the brutal honesty of her portraits. Individual members of the Ťapák family – siblings living together with their families in a shared tumbledown house – symbolize both people's inability to change their own low social standing and also the deeply ingrained nature of feudal family relations. On the one hand, it seems they are keeping together as a family; on the other, their ties stop them from developing as people. The first to realize this is the oldest sister, Il'a. She tries to bring order to their lives and improve them somehow, for which she earns the nickname, 'Queenie'. The others reject her efforts at change and so she leaves home. Aside from general fecklessness and apathy, though, the characters also show passion and a desire for love and better conditions. Their nicknames give us insight into their personalities: as well as Il'a the Queen, another key character is the cripple Anča the Adder, ardently yearning for love.

Božena Slančíková Timrava (1867 – 1951)

Daughter of a Lutheran pastor, Timrava spent her whole life in villages of Novohrad, her region of birth. Her father encouraged his children's literary activities so that although Božena never left the region for very long nor had much education apart from at the local junior school and one year at the town school, she was still able to become Slovakia's leading female novelist during her lifetime. She took the settings and themes of her stories from the two or three villages she knew best; despite this, her prose chronicles the wider features of the times in which she lived: the shift in national consciousness, profound social changes, conflicting opinions between young and old and the emancipation of women. Drawing her characters from her own environment, she depicts with candour and deep psychological insight their yearning for happiness together with such ills as alcoholism, ignorance, powerlessness, apathy and a stubborn refusal to change.

Cripple, as they call her, only cries and Mišo, showing no sympathy, leaves the room. He used to love his sister but now he avoids her. To him, she is like an evil viper who finds no joy in life and thus won't let others be happy either. Why should he care about anything else when they won't let him marry Kata? She doesn't love anyone, nor does she believe in the love of other people. She's only there in the house so she can tyrannize them all. What she wants must happen: she who cannot even walk; she – the beggar...

Cripple finally stops sobbing, puts the sewing she had on her lap away and slides down from the bench. She moves across the room on her hands and knees and goes outside to look for Mišo. He sleeps in the stable next to the oxen.

She crawls to the door and tries to open it, but it is locked from inside. So she bangs on it.

"Who is it?" The voice from inside the dark stable is defiant.

"It's me, Miško. Open the door!" says Cripple in a sweet voice still trembling from crying. Nothing stirs inside, there's no movement at all – he's silent. Mišo doesn't want to know about her.

"Miško, my dear, my sweetheart, open the door for God's sake!"

"I won't!"

"Why are you so angry with me – I only want the best for you!" she says lovingly. "Why marry Kata when she's not the right woman for a decent lad like you? Miško, my dear, you'll find another girl. Take my advice – be sensible!"

"Go away, you viper!" he rasps.

The crippled woman goes silent, her breathing stops for a moment and her face turns pale. Then she throws herself in helpless grief onto the ground and starts pulling out her hair. So he, too, calls her that! Everyone is against her: to them all, she's just a viper, a cripple…! Suppressing her bitterness, she tries to talk to him again, to persuade and beg him, to flatter him, but not once does she say: go and marry Kata – and that's why Mišo doesn't answer. So she goes quiet too and crawling on all fours along the path by the house, she makes her way back inside.

It's dark. The moon hasn't come out yet and the sky is full of stars. As she reaches the door, someone walking along the path trips over her.

"What are you?" said a voice which Anča recognizes as that of old Fuzák. "Are you a dog or what?"

Anča winces but doesn't say a word. Let him think she's a dog. She doesn't want to talk to anyone and certainly not him. He once advised her mother to nail Anča to a board and that made Anča pray for her illness to strike his son, too. And now she has to pay for it with the cruel love she feels for the young man.

Something flashes through the old man's mind and he bends down to touch her.

"Is it you, Anka? I'm sorry… you're slithering like a viper." She grabs his hand wondering whether she should bite it since she's a viper. But another voice can now be heard, one which, when Anča

hears it, makes her tremble with joy. She lets go of the old man's hand.

"Is Anča here?" wonders Jano. His father enters the house and Jano steps out onto the path outside. "Why are you crawling around in the dark?"

Jano crouches down to her. One can tell by his voice that he's a good man. He smells of alcohol, but he isn't drunk, just merry. "Come here, I'll carry you into the house," he says cheerfully stretching his hands towards her. "Or don't you want me to?"

Hot blood rushes to Anča's face; her heart is pounding so hard it almost bursts.

"Jano, don't!" she refuses, pushing him away with force, but in that very moment she feels an overwhelming desire to get closer to him, throw herself into his arms and die right there. "I'm not a little child for you to carry!" she exclaims once she has pulled herself together again.

"Then what are you? You're even worse than a child," says Jano. Now he has an unusual expression on his face – the passion he feels is putting fire into his eyes. He wraps his arms around her lovely waist and pulls her closer to him. But she pushes him away in desperation.

"Jano, do you want me to hit you? Can you see my hand? I won't be made a fool of – just so you know…!" And his closeness makes it almost impossible for her to breathe. Jano stands up. The strange fire has vanished from his eyes and he has sobered up. He shakes his head and says acidly:

"How proud you are! I didn't know you too could be like that, you…"

"…viper," Anča finishes his sentence.

Jano walks proudly past her back into the house and as the door closes behind him, she again throws herself onto the ground. She'd rather be dead than a cripple. She's a viper to him, too!

Meanwhile, the men in the room are enjoying themselves. Each threw in a coin and Zuza has brought them pálenka from the tavern. The drink has enlivened them. Paľo, the jester, has also warmed up. The German in him has faded and the buttermilk in his veins turned into blood, his kind round eyes burning with fire. When Jano, whose eyes keeps gravitating to the empty seat of the crippled woman who pushed him away, notices, he says:

"Paľo, go and bring your wife back! You've punished her enough by now. She's waiting for you – don't make her worry anymore."

"How do you know she's worried?" he growls. "I won't go. She began to sulk – let her sulk. Let her stay where she is – in Sitno – I don't care!"

"So will you let someone else have her? I saw Ďuro Úvodovie circling around the school garden again yesterday…"

"What?" Paľo stares numbly; then gets up from the table. Ďuro Úvod – huh! He'll show her - he will tear her to pieces…For a moment, a happy smile appears on Jano's handsome face. He gets up too and follows Paľo. As he walks by, he looks again at the crippled woman's empty seat and his expression darkens. He wants nothing more than to see her again, her who raised her hand to him, so that he can step on her like on a viper… When he goes outside (the moon is already shining in the sky) he sees Anča sitting on the ground not far from the stable door. Jano's eyes widen; he turns and begins to walk towards her with the rebellious self-confidence of someone who´s been insulted. And then he hears her sobs: Anča is crying. Jano freezes, then goes nearer and instead of crushing her like a viper, asks: "Why are you crying, Anča? What's happened to you?"

"Do I not have reasons to cry? I'll be crying because of this burden of mine forever!" Jano leans down and strokes her hair with affectionate pity, just like he used to. "Calm down for once, Anička – you can't change the way things are…"

Tonight Iľa has "forgotten" to lock the door to the school yard again but doesn't have much hope left that Paľo will come for her. She knows the Ťapák family and knows what they're like – how they have to be pushed into doing something and are as stubborn as mules. When she left her husband for the first time (it's been five years since then), Paľo came to call her back right away. His mother made him do so; she was still alive then, poor woman. But now there's no one to send him for her. Iľa may as well stay a servant where she is now until judgement day. The other daughters-in-law, the wives of Paľo's brothers, are glad not to have her there. Oh, how tough it is to be a servant! Not a single minute does she have for herself, no time or freedom to do anything except obey her masters' orders. Her heel hurts from being on her feet all day long.

If she only had wings to fly away on. Not even her education nor her diploma seem important to them.

A servant is a servant, a master is a master. The latter is heartless – and so is Paľo of the Ťapáks (even though he's just a villager) because he still hasn't come for her. And Iľa must grit her teeth as tears start filling her eyes. She would have thought that it would be him missing her and not the other way around. There, her pride is gone…!

Iľa must break her chain of thoughts and wipe away her tears…

If Paľo came for her she wouldn't go with him anyway, because she promised herself not to go back to the Ťapáks' – and her words are sacred. However, at the Jablonckos', her father's place, she owns a brick pantry: they could build another room alongside

this summer and there the two of them could live undisturbed by others like a pair of pigeons. But Paľo isn’t coming for her···

Iľa hangs her head and tears fill her eyes again. She cries, she, a proud daughter-in-law, educated, too··· And then the unlocked gate to the yard suddenly creaks. Iľa’s breath and heart stop. She stares tensely into the yard through the slats on the apiary. A tall figure of a man is walking briskly from the gate. Iľa’s face starts to sweat. She rests her head quickly on a pillow and pretends to be sleeping. After a while, the door of the apiary, also left unlocked, creaks open and Paľo enters the room. Standing at the end of the bed, he shakes the quilt and calls out:

“Iľa, are you awake or not? Come back home!”

Iľa is lying fully dressed, always ready to go back home with her husband, but she doesn’t say a word. She pretends to be asleep – and it is easy to believe since she spends the whole day working. Paľo has to call her name again and pulls the quilt even more forcefully.

Excerpt translated by Jonathan Gresty

MILO URBAN

Living Whip

Living Whip

Critics sometimes compare Living Whip to the famous European war novels of Remarque, Glaeser and A. Zweig. In it, the twenty-three-year-old author, Milo Urban, uses his creative powers to describe what went on behind the front, how some people fought against the cruelty and meaningless carnage, and above all, how the war impacted on life in one village through deprivation, the loss of loved ones, the return of invalids and moral destruction.

The war novel, Living Whip is set in the poor Orava village of Ráztoky, a place not directly affected by the carnage of the front but one where the local people experience the war vicariously, through "news from afar, filtered and diluted, without force or sharpness". And yet the war still has a dramatic effect on their fates. Through his portrayal of individual characters and their attitudes, the author captures the moral ethos of this closed society and its devastation; in this respect, it is both a war novel and a social novel. The main character, Adam Hlavaj, is conscripted but cannot come to terms with leaving his wife and little son at home in order to kill and therefore deserts the army. After he returns home, the death of his wife, caused by a depraved notary, arouses in him a hatred of war. He must take revenge for her death on the 'genteel' world around him and his actions become not merely a protest against war but against social injustice in general.

Milo Urban (1904 – 1982)

The foundation of Czechoslovakia in 1918 following the breakup of the old Austro-Hungary was an important stimulus to Slovak national life in all areas of culture; Slovak literature, for instance, could now free itself from the shackles of its predominantly nationalistic function. A key figure in the modernization of its prose was Milo Urban, one of the country's major literary talents throughout the interwar period. He had produced work for magazines at the age of only sixteen writing both short stories and a novel titled Tiene (Shadows); as an eighteen-year-old, he published the novella Jašek Kutliak spod Bučinky (1922). The pinnacle of his literary career, however, came a few years later with the novella Za vyšným mlynom (Beyond the Upper Mill, 1926), which the libretto of Eugen Suchoň's famous national opera Krútňava was based on, and the novel Živý bič (Living Whip, 1927).

One good thing about the horrific global dogfight was that soldiers began to find themselves and their lost hands again. They started to get a sense of their own individuality and stopped relying on supernatural forces or believing in miracles. The scales fell from their eyes and they saw the lies and everything surrounding them. The bloodbath rinsed off the mould of their old ideas and brought to the surface stark new truths looking for people to bear witness to them. Uncouth, battle-weary soldiers became these people, men who, digging trenches, pulled the truths from out of the ground, examined how they gushed out of the wounds of men lying on their sides, listened to their echoes from the boom of howitzers and chattering of machine guns. They grabbed them like a thirsty man would grab water and passed them on heavily from hand to hand, playing with them, weighing them up without quite knowing what they had found. From this great bloody book, with its soul shaken to its core, they learned these truths with remarkable speed, racing through them and without even realizing it, becoming their owners and propagators of something which had been lying dormant within them for centuries. And they passed them on through their rough speech, their curses, their gestures and facial expressions: these truths flew

through the air and took root in dried up, inflamed hearts everywhere.

Here in the blood, a new age was born, one full of bold words, brave speeches and meetings between men; and so a new man rose from the blood, one who had found his brave, strong hands, hands that could no longer be so easily shackled or caused to tremble. In the internecine struggle taking place, laws were ripped up, social norms abandoned and the masks ripped off the faces of the untouchable authorities of this world. This new man no longer wanted medieval armour or mysteries: he did not want to be a trickster or a pharisee but a bold and resilient person in his own right, someone without embellishments.

Adam Hlavaj was one such person. Tired to the bone of all the blood and brutality, sick of having to rely on circumstances and fate, he took things into his own hands and slipped away one dark night.

Not forward to his neighbours, though, but backwards to where his bonny son with hair like flax and his wife's soft embrace, creating their own private world, awaited him. Towards the marsh, where the reeds rustled and in summer the frogs croaked, towards Ráztoky.

It was a brave, almost impossible step to take. But Adam Hlavaj knew what he was doing. Nothing that lay ahead of him could deter him from his mission, so determined was he to overcome everything which stood in his way. On he went steadfastly for weeks on end, day and night, hiding in barns and forests, defying the illness and hunger that beset him on his journey. Some days the police were on his heels for hours on end, even firing at him; in one village, a Pole locked him in his cellar but Hlavaj managed to escape. In another village in Poland, he lay for three days in a barn with a raging fever. His strong constitution helped him, though, and on he went, wading across marshes and rivers, clambering through impenetrable thickets and precarious mountain passes. He saw bears, heard thunderclaps overhead; nights full of strange, haunting visions were followed by days when he had no idea where he was but it

did not stop him. He got up and went on tirelessly despite the blisters on his feet and the scratches on his hands and face. He didn't shave for weeks on end and spent his last money on some old clothes he bought from a farmer; it was much safer for him in those, at least if he kept his distance. If he got too close to people, his youth and good health would soon arouse suspicion.

It was then he saw what the war had done. For weeks he tramped through burnt out villages and ravaged fields arousing feelings of sadness and horror. He saw gutted farmsteads, decimated forests, blown up bridges and roads pitted with holes. From the destruction came the mouldy silence of the grave and the stench of decomposing bodies, half-buried or piled up in corners and forgotten. People stood weeping amidst the debris and Hlavaj saw them foraging through the ashes, looking for what was left of their possessions and their hard labour. These tragic sights imprinted themselves on his memory and spoke of terrible offences, rising like smoke into the sky and crying out for revenge. Such wrongs had to be redressed. And so his fists were clenched and his soul burned with an implacable rage. To fight was imperative – to wash blood away with blood and to punish one offence with another. There had been enough shows of forgiveness, those noble gestures beloved by cowards and misused by villains to excuse the evils they perpetrated. New evil and new sins had accumulated; the curtain should now be ripped open and the devils in human form behind it chased away for ever.

There had been too much forgiveness.

He himself had to become a wolf or a devil in order to do it. All the lies had to be exhumed and destroyed forever.

It was not right to suffer evil; it had to be resisted and eradicated like weeds. He did not need to go far: evil was not up in the clouds but down there amongst people.

People themselves wove this evil and then perished in it, like spiders in a web. They dug their own holes.

Men had to be set free and given back their lost hands. No longer should they be seen as just parts of a machine, as instruments to be used at will.

His was a deeply felt creed, full of a natural truth emanating from everything that was alive. Standing outside his own stable, Adam Hlavaj had finally arrived home again with a creed born out of the blood, pain, tears and curses of millions.

It was a strange, explosive kind of creed, similar to a grenade, its inside full of clear burning truth and its pin forged from terrible human hatred. It needed only moving parts – people to detonate it.

And there were millions of them: moving, fearful parts with the appearance of innocents.

They just needed to be mobilized...

Adam Hlavaj wiped his brow and stood up. It was late and he had not yet been welcomed.

He walked towards the living room with that strange icy feeling of someone returning home after a long time away. At the corner he looked around warily to check no-one could see him. He had to be careful because the police would surely be looking for him in Ráztoky. But when he saw no-one, only fog hovering above the ground, he stole silently up to the window. It was dark in the room so Hlavaj, thinking that Eva was sleeping, tapped on the glass.

"Eva..."

No noise came from the room though so he knocked louder.

"Eva, Evka!..."

Nothing could be heard except the sound of water dripping from the roof. Under the eaves it was dry and warm and there was a smell of dry timber, wood shavings and flax; a wide new stump for chopping wood on gleamed white and a rag fluttered in the breeze. He knocked again but when no-one answered, he walked to the door, grabbed the handle and tried to force it open.

"Evka, open the door, Ev-ka!"

But the only reply was a long deaf silence which shot out in front of him and looked him in the eyes with an icy, mocking expression. Hlavaj recoiled in alarm, turned his eyes to the ground and wondered:

"What's the matter with her?"

But then, as he listened, the silence started to feel strange and solid, almost tangible. And then he clearly heard from the other side of the door a silent ringing of bells which chilled him to the bone. The house and its loft were full of a ringing silence which came out from its cracks and from beneath the floor, barking at him like a huge ghostly dog tied up on a chain. Hlavaj saw it rising and falling like the sea, cold and dead, enveloping him and seizing his throat with its frozen fingers. There was something ominous about it, making him imagine the most sinister things. Adam Hlavaj felt a terrible dread. He turned and with a brisk step, disappeared into the dark towards the village...

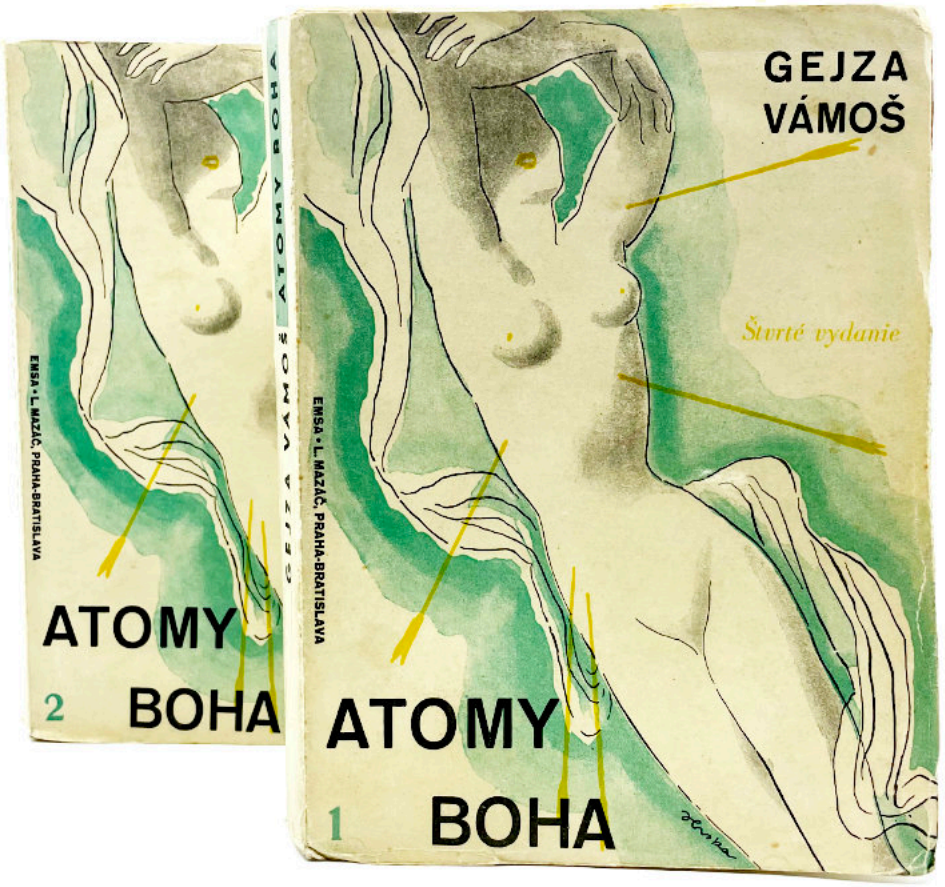
The image of that foot, wearing just a saturated shoe with its tongue sticking out, entered the consciousness of Okolický the notary in the same way unwanted guests may forcibly enter a room. And the image became indelibly etched in his mind. In vain did he try to forget her or erase her from his memory; she had taken root in his head and every day he was forced to remember her together with all the details she had brought into his life. Until recently he had looked at her with a certain masculine pride but her inconsiderate death had now made such a cruel mockery of his pride that even the conscience of Okolický was troubled by it.

"Whose fault was it that she drowned?" he kept saying to himself, emphasizing the words as if he wanted to blame a third person for what had happened. And then he felt ashamed, as if he was trying to make excuses. But the notary, Okolický, was too proud to apologize for his actions. The noble blood in his veins and the whole tradition in which he had grown up prevented him from doing so.

Excerpt translated by Jonathan Gresty

GEJZA VÁMOŠ

Atoms of God



Atoms of God

Welcome to a world of venereal diseases, bacteria and viruses. This masterpiece of Slovak expressionism (first edition - 1928) with its obvious nihilistic streak is based on the author's philosophical work dealing with "the principle of cruelty". He considers cruelty to be the main principle of the organic realm and the purpose of man on Earth to entertain a cruel, bored God.

This naturalist novel's unusually fragmented composition is held together by the character of Dr. Zurian, who works at the Department of Venereological Diseases. His philosophical thoughts, deliberate self-infection with a contagious disease in order to defeat it, conversations with prostitutes, and broken relationship with a woman with whom he eventually commits suicide are all intertwined lines of an innovative text depicting the social atmosphere and giving insight into ideological tendencies in the interwar period in Slovakia.

Gejza Vámoš (1901 – 1956)

Gejza Vámoš (1901 - 1956) was born into a Hungarian Jewish family, studied medicine and philosophy and then worked as a medical spa doctor. Before the totalitarian regime took over after the end of World War II, he emigrated to China and later to Brazil, where he provided treatment in poor communities and succumbed to beriberi himself.

Preface: The Struggle

God scattered His atoms on the earth and in the water. Organic life grew abundant. This manner of living was easy. Food right at hand, true immortality, because the living atoms split and proliferated.

But God was bored. He did not enjoy this way of life. So He wanted a struggle. He agitated the atoms against each other, so they would slaughter each other. Indeed, He let them form organized, cohesive communities. The manner of fighting among these glomerates and atoms became more interesting. And God went on. He was infuriated at those glomerates – animal, individual, scattered living atoms, but also infuriated the units against each other. He arranged life in such a way that the living species had to attack and eat to keep themselves alive. And the condition of life became the death of another.

Above the motionless lava, above the dead rocks, was unleashed the endless, desperate struggle of the living, who were condemned by the Divine Whim. Everything perished, died, but their descent was intertwined with the continuous wild fight, until the last moment. No living creature, whether a single cell or a

more complex, complete animal, could peacefully decline to the final destruction. One ate grass, dug for worms, caught fish, hunted for birds, and killed animals.

And this struggle became more and more refined. God still did not enjoy the chaotic, meaningless struggle of his scattered and gathered atoms. Therefore, He created the cruelest, most violent, and most cunning type of fighting clusters: Mankind.

While He limited the method of struggle of his living brothers, making them only miserable machines, He gave Mankind wide possibilities. God gave Mankind one thread from the spool of his infinite wisdom, He opened to him a single path, on which he was permitted to fool around and flutter about, unbridled. In relation to other living creatures, He allowed him everything, to undermine the lives of these beings with the most extreme cruelty.

Everything that He allowed only to Mankind, that He put right in his hand, always served only to subjugate the world, to obtain more refined and improved ways of obtaining food and protecting one's own poor, soft, vulnerable body.

And Mankind enslaved all living creatures. No form of life could resist him. Except one.

God's unjoined, scattered Atoms.

And the greatest moment in the life of Mankind, in his whole existence on Earth, was when God gave him a microscope, when the human eye for the first time saw a single living atom. When it was first made known to him that he himself was made up of God's countless, wonderfully clever and pitiably useless, grouped and living atoms.

Andoneof the people whofirst saw it, to whom it was given to look into the mechanism of life for the first time, that most meritorious man of the world, who discovered the greatest mystery of living beings, is the greatest blossom of the human race, the most blessed of His living creatures, – this man looking into the microscope is: a doctor.

The Three Doctors

Doctor Zurian, after finishing his medical studies, was admitted to Letná Hospital for his residency. After unpleasant delays around the fulfillment of his request, today he relaxed for the first time. In the morning he moved in, arranged his things, and used the little time before lunch to look around the area a bit.

With a feeling of pride and satisfaction, he walked through the garden around the big red-brick building of the wards. It's like a fairy tale here, he thought. How lucky I am. I don't have to exchange the green of my homeland, our awakening spring – I was home not long ago for the Easter holidays – for the ugly, uncomfortable stone colossi of the metropolis. I arrive, and look, here too spring has sprung. Green lanes of blue lilacs, fill your lungs and let your fragrant breath let forth a quiet breeze. Dear sun, bestow your fiery kiss upon the earth, that kiss that gives life and resurrects the dead. May the blue heavens, the pleasant smile of eternal peace, caress the soul of the small, sad children of this land. Inspire the cricket, let him chirp his march of hope, let the swallows raise up their gentle, silvery twittering. White pigeons, spin, spin. Under the blue sky, it was as if a kindly God waved the white flag of eternal reconciliation.

Zurian was twenty-four years old. A young man, healthy as a beech tree, with a wide, soft, Slovak face, blue eyes, straight hair and a muscular body. He came from the Váh river valley and at home, among his own people, he was happy to return to his own hard, expressive dialect. He was a son of the Váh. He wasn't afraid of this capricious river, he loved it.

A few minutes later the doctors came back, and as it was striking twelve, went into the main building, where there was the cafeteria.

There awaited Zurian his first disappointment.

Medusa

Medusa was a terribly interesting monster. She was slender, one might say as thin as a matchstick, but where it counted, everything was beautifully and gently rounded. She was pale, a pale face with a little red mouth, she had a high forehead and above it, wavy golden hair. Because of that hair, which moved around her forehead like golden-bronze snakes, he called her Medusa. And she deserved that name for other reasons too. She was wild at heart and impossible to deal with. Every day, she looked at Zurian as at a stranger; every day he had to tame her, subjugate her. She didn’t know the ways of women in love, coming to the man they love, caressing him, stroking his hair, speaking with him in a gentle loving voice. Whenever they met, the first thing they did was fight cruelly with each other. She always found some cause for it. He always came too late or too early. When she couldn’t catch him at this anymore, she looked at him carefully: “Who powdered your nose?”

“I did it myself.”

“That’s not true, you’re deceiving me, you’ve never done that.”

“The devil deceives, not I. Make a note of it that I never deceive. I don’t even deceive where I should deceive. We don’t have it in the family. It’s my oldest mistake, that I’ve always been stupidly and destructively honest.”

“Ha, ha, ha,” she laughed cynically.

Karol was in despair, but he didn't know how to break away from her. He was her slave. He was a slave of her chaotic soul. Of that soul which hated life, which shunned human society. No, Medusa never spoke to anyone. She never had friends. She had no interest in life. He could never talk her into going with him to the theater, to a concert, or to a coffeehouse. Despite her fastidious and fussy taste, she wasn't interested in clothing or fashion. Her repudiation of and contempt for life were endless.

Only a single person knew about Medusa, and that was Eugen Korda.

Zurian was tied to him by unforgettable memories.

He hadn't seen him for a year or so. They were supposed to start working together at Letná Hospital in Prague, but Eugen thought it over, went home, and had a practice somewhere in a smaller hospital in the country.

This Eugen Korda had been Zurian's roommate for several years, and his comrade-in-arms through their medical qualifying exams. They had shared the adventures and dreams of student life. Whenever he thought of Eugen, he smiled with a great inner pleasure and bliss, because he loved the memory of that boy, as he had once loved his pure, peaceful presence. For Eugen was pure and peaceful; those two words characterized him best. They always called each other by their nicknames, Eugenko and Karolko.

Eugenko himself didn't experience any sensational events, while Zurian was constantly mixed up in all sorts of wild incidents and episodes. He had barely finished with one such thing and taken a little break when he fell neck-deep into the next one. And Eugen was never interested. He could be a witness to anything. His cold, genteel, pale face never, never even moved. He never asked him where he'd been, where he was going, what he had, what he was doing. When he witnessed the beginning of something, he was never curious as to the outcome. And no one could find out anything bad about Zurian from him.

Oh, Karol had fond memories of that pure ethereal shadow, he dearly loved his Eugenko.

Eugenko was once more witness to Zurian's pain.

The previous day, Zurian had fought bitterly with Medusa. The cause, as always, was petty and ridiculous. She laughed at him so cynically, threw such impossible sins in his face, the products of her wild fantasy, defied logic and twisted Zurian's words so senselessly, that he nearly went crazy in powerless fury.

No, it can't go on like this, I can't bear this anymore, and I'll

find a way to show you that you're not necessary to my life, and I don't have to swallow everything from you.

Before she could block his way, he ran out on the street.

After lunch the next day, he went by train four stations outside of Prague, so he could overcome temptation more clearly, and he wandered through forests and meadows, muffling the painful longing he felt for Medusa.

What was she doing now, what was she doing? Yes, he felt dreary, disconsolate, gloomy.

In the evening, he took the train back to the city.

At home, Eugenko greeted him with a solemn face. “Here, this is for you."

What is it? A telegram.

He opened it with trembling hands.

He trembled so much, his whole body shaking, that he could hardly read: Your girlfriend is dead, don't come back. Ol’ga.

Everything went black before Zurian's eyes. Eugenko jumped forward quickly and caught him, because he staggered and looked around uncontrollably for support. His mind worked sluggishly, grinding up the words of the telegram. Ol’ga, yes. Ol’ga wrote, Medusa's only friend, with whom she often met, the only person whom she allowed to take an interest in her fate. And now she had certainly called her and made her last request: send this telegram. Zurian clutched his head, wrung his hands in despair, and thick tears streamed down his face. In his excruciating powerlessness he didn't know what to do. Eugenko watched him carefully.

“Eugen, Eugenko, she’s gone, it's the end,” and he gave him the telegram. “Eugenko, what should I do, what should I do?”

Eugen read the paper. “Nothing, there's nothing you can do, they're warning you not to come, so stay home. And the less you suffer, the better it will be for you. Things can't be changed, so you have to get used to the situation.”

“Eugenko, Eugenko, you know who she was, you know what she meant to me, you know who I've lost and you know why.” His words were drowned in inconsolable sobbing.

“Don't cry, Karolko, get hold of yourself, you're not a woman, after all. Go to sleep now, and tomorrow you'll see what to do, and how.” Gently but with an energetic movement, he started to take off Zurian's clothes and tuck him into bed like a little boy. “There now, you’ll get some sleep and in the morning you'll feel better.”

Excerpt translated by Charles Sabatos