

Cobain's disciples by Miroslav Pech

Translated by Mike Baugh

I'm John

My town has about three and a half thousand people, and just about all of 'em work in one of the factories. Rotating through three shifts. My dad does. Not my mom. She was an accountant, but she's got her own pet shop now. In the store she's got hamsters, guinea pigs, rats, gerbils, a jerboa, snakes, turtles, tortoises, tarantulas, fish, parrots and parakeets. You can pick up big sacks of rabbit food, cat food and dog chow there. Collars and leashes too. Seed. I hope I never have to do shift-work. When dad has nights, you can't even talk to him. When he isn't working, he's watching TV. If television hadn't been invented, a lot of people would be totally lost. I don't need TV, though—I've got the Beatles.

There are fifteen pubs in town, one hotel with a gym, eight Vietnamese shops, one jeweler, a place for shoes and fabric, two butcher shops, one candy store, one bookstore-slash-video rental, one library, one church, and two brothels. Mom says that a lot of her customers are Austrians, which is good. When I finish school, I'll work with my mom—I won't have to work three shifts and you'll be able to talk to me.

I dig around my drawer for my sunglasses. My Lennon glasses. I've always found it completely unfair that I have the eyesight of an eagle. That's the reason I don't have prescription glasses. I pop the black glass out of the Lennons and put on the empty frames. My hair is fourteen centimeters long. I look into the mirror and squint a bit; John Lennon squints back.

Time to show myself in public.

John Lennon never came to my school, but people come to my classroom to look at me. The other kids can't take their eyes off of me. The teachers come by too, and during the big break even the principal stops by.

I just sit at my desk giving the peace-sign with my skinny fingers. I'm a hippie these days, and it's a hippie's job to preach peace and raise his two fingers to the world.

So that's what I do.

To everyone who walks by me, who looks at me, who even just glances at me, I raise my fingers and say:

Peace, brother.

Peace, sister.

Peace, brother and sister.

Peace, Miss.

Everyone laughs. I'm popular, and because I've always loved attention, it feels good. My pink friend starts calling me John, and it catches on. Now that's what everyone calls me.

I couldn't believe my luck when my eyebrows started growing together. Lennon's did. I never liked my Roman nose, but it stopped bothering me when I realized John Lennon had one too.

My braces suck, though. The wires are tight. I sit there in the chair with my jaws wide open while the dentist cranks on the bolts with an Allen wrench. Once a month. Afterwards we shop for groceries at Penny Market.

"We might as well," mom says, "we gotta be here anyway."

Then we head home with a trunk full of food and I sit and suffer. I can't eat because of the wires pulling tight on my teeth, hurting. I can't bite a damn thing and I'm stuck slurping soup and porridge all week.

"You're suffering now," my dad says, "but you'll be happy you did when you have straight teeth."

My mom revealed to me once that when I was maybe two, I had a head injury. I fell out of my chair. I got some sort of hematoma on my noggin and the doctors wanted to operate. When they were finally ready to do somethin', though, the hematoma was already getting smaller. Nobody could really figure out why. All the specialists just shook their heads. Before their very eyes the hematoma vanished, and all at once they announced that without it I was no longer of any interest to them. They told my parents to take me home, which is just what they did. Mom thinks that maybe that head injury affected my teeth somehow, because my teeth aren't like everyone else's. I bet if I read somewhere that John Lennon wore braces, it'd be easier to take. But he didn't because he never got knocked in the head like me, so he never looked like a monster before he was even a teen.

I Start the Beatles

My passion for The Beatles infects a couple other people in my class. On the magnet board we write out different codes, like:

Give Piece a Chance

Al You Need is Love

A Day In the Life

Strawbery Fields Forever

Stuff like that.

The magnet board becomes as much of an attraction as me. The next day I start the Beatles. Our George is a kid who loves boats, model trains and Adolf Hitler; he gets ear infections all the time and always has a yellow discharge running out of them.

"Sieg heil!"

"Hey, your hairy son is at it again."

I try to explain to George that the real Harrison wasn't a Nazi, but a Hare Krishna fan. I even teach him the Hare Krishna mantra. George listens to me as some yellow pus runs down his face.

"You get it now?"

"Sieg heil, Hare Krishna!"

We decide Spud's our Ringo. He has the most tapes and CDs of the Beatles.

Paul is a computer nerd with a blonde Afro. He's the only one of us who can play an instrument – the piano. He knows how to play "Let It Be," and his parents have *Abbey Road* on vinyl. In a trance we listen to "Come Together," "I Want You," "Here Comes the Sun," and "Octopus Garden." Other ones too. The only thing that doesn't really work is Paul's hair. Even he admits that curly blonde hair doesn't fit, and he has it dyed black. People from all over the school come to look at me, the magnet board, and now Paul.

They call him Bubo.

There's a ping-pong table on the cement playground. It quickly becomes our sacred spot. Everyone starts playing ping-pong. I sit on the bench and through the empty frames of my Lennon's I watch them play doubles.

"Hi, John."

"Peace, brother," I greet my yellow friend.

He sits next to me and scratches a huge scab beneath his elbow.

"You play pong?"

"Nah."

"Gotta paddle?"

"Yeah."

"I don't."

"Aha."

My yellow friend sits silently for a while. He shows me the scab peeling off.

"Hey."

"Whoa."

"I heard you're looking for a guitar," he says.

"I am."

"My sister has one."

"I don't, but I'm looking for one."

"And I need a ping-pong paddle."

That night my yellow friend rings my doorbell and hands over a guitar; he gets a paddle for it.

Everything Eventually Ceases to Exist

In America a bunch of terrorists get pissed off and crash some planes into buildings. I watch a concert held for the victims, but it's boring. Until Mick Jagger and Keith Richards come out—Mick struts around like a deranged marionette.

Life is totally different with a guitar.

I start writing my own songs. On the top and bottom strings, mainly.

Not long ago I learned that George Harrison died. The real one. I got a song out of it, though—one I dedicated to him.

There's one less Beatle now. Cancer got him. It's weird to think that a couple years before Harrison's death, someone tried to kill him. Like with John Lennon. George was walking in the garden, and some mentally ill guy runs out of the bushes and stabs him a bunch of times. They say he just stood there as the crazy guy ran up to him. He didn't even move. He just waited until he stabbed him, and to pass the time chanted, "Hare Krishna." So I wrote Harrison a song. I'm glad I did. But, sort of sad-glad, since if he didn't die, the song wouldn't exist.

On the town-square, I run into Yellow's sister.

"I hear you have my guitar."

"Uh huh."

"The little shit just stole it from me."

"I traded him a ping pong paddle for it."

"I heard."

Yellow's sister has big boobs and a little t-shirt.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know it was yours."

"Doesn't matter—I never played on it anyway."

I go to school that day and see my yellow friend sitting on a bench watching his sister playing ping-pong. Using my old paddle.

I have guitar after school. Our physics teacher shows us how to play in the school workshop. He's bald and has red hair, shaved short, growing around his ears. He wears glasses, has a little nose and a harelip. With his big jowls and no chin, he looks like a toad. With a speech impediment. His r's sound like v's.

"Now, vepeat aftev me."

"I can't, sir, you're playing too fast."

"Sovvy. I'll slow down."

I learn basic rhythm and the E and G chords there, but it's all pretty dorky and I don't plan on coming anymore.

My cousin tutors me in math so I don't flunk out. She's cramming math facts into my head, when all the sudden I notice a yellow songbook, *You Can Play Too*, on the shelf.

"I didn't know you played anything."
"I don't. The book just kind of lies around here."
"Can I borrow it?"
"Sure, just don't mess it up."
"Ok."

As soon as I'm home, I grab the guitar and open up the songbook. There's a bunch of dumb stuff, but smack-dab in the middle is "Yesterday." Unfortunately, I only know two chords, and there's gotta be a bazillion of them in "Yesterday." Doesn't matter. It's dog-shit anyway. If only it were "Help." "Help" is a great song. A trip, a manifesto, a code, a battle cry. But "Help" isn't in the yellow songbook. I don't need to learn any songs. I'll just use the yellow songbook to learn chords. Until then I'll have to make up my own. I just like making a racket. I keep playing the same two chords over and over, putting myself in a trance. Everything eventually ceases to exist. The bed I'm sitting on, the posters on the walls, the walls, my room, my building, my town—it all vanishes.

Withdrawal Symptoms

In Czech class we're discussing similes. To keep myself interested, I scratch *Come As You Are* into the desk. I think about Kurt Cobain and how hypnotic that song sounds.

"Now use me in a simile," our teacher says. Our scholarly heads are so heavy with knowledge they're resting on the desks. We stare blankly at the teacher and count down every minute and second until the bell.

"What about you, Denisa?"
"Me?" squeeks Denisa, beet red down to the roots of her hair.
"What are my eyes like?"
"Your eyes are like wells," Denisa spouts.
"Wonderful!"
Denisa breathes a sigh of relief.
"Now you, Tomáš."
"Your dress is blue like the sea."
Standa's hand shoots up to the ceiling.
"Kateřina."
"Your earrings are like beads."
"Over here," Standa calls. The teacher ignores him.
"Pavla."
"You're as wise as an owl."
"Me!" Standa shouts, "Call on me!"
Our Czech teacher relents and calls on him.
"You sit there like a pile of shit."

Though clearly retarded, Standa's behavior occasionally betrays the unmistakable mark of genius. He's fat like Josef Pepa, and because he's slow he gets beaten up a lot. He comes from a long line of farmers, and he looks strong enough to pull a plow himself. Unfortunately, he hasn't figured out how to use his strength against the bullies that constantly flock to him, waiting for the right moment to jump on the poor guy and get a few whacks in. One time it was six against one. They were hanging from his neck, and Standa just plodded down the hallway mumbling, "Come on, guys, cut it out..." A kid once shot pepper spray into his eyes. It would have dropped anyone else. Standa just pawed at his red eyes and said, "What was that? It kinda burns."

I saw him crying once. Sitting alone, back to the other kids laughing at him, shouting at him. I was shocked to see that someone like Standa could cry without someone firing tear gas at him.

That's just how Standa is. At home he drives a tractor and mucks out stalls. You'd need a fire hose to get the dirt from under his nails. He can smoke a dart in three breaths.

I start a band with my red and blue friend—The Withdrawal Symptoms. We rehearse at Red’s cottage. We make drums out of plastic buckets and cymbals from an aluminum sheet. We hand Red a guitar—it’s got two strings. None of us is about to buy a new guitar. Or tune the old ones. It’s not like we play folk. Blueboy is on the drums and I sing. The Lennon look is long gone and I’ve transformed into some evil mix of Kurt Cobain and Iggy Pop. Our songs come out of jam sessions and we record them right away, because otherwise we’d forget them. I sing into a little tape recorder. I have to have it right next to my lips so you can hear anything through the tinny roar. Our biggest hit is “I Don’t Got No Satisfaction”:

Gimme a smoke
Gimme a toke
Gimme a sip
Gimme acid
Nothing
Ever
Happens

We’ve got other ones too: “Crack that Whip,” “Fuckers on the Bus.” He lives pretty far away from trade school, and that big sardine can on wheels has turned out to be quite the muse for Red:

Every morning I get on the bus
I want to puke on everyone I see
On the stupid idiots explaining
All they’ve done the day before

Fuckers
Fuckers
Fuckers on the bus

Red’s guitar sounds different every time we rehearse. Blue keeps having to trade out his “drums.” He was going through drumsticks like crazy—he made do with plants and flowers we snatched from the garden—so now he’s settled on drumming with hammers. At rehearsal we smoke my brother’s weed.

On the Run

Maybe half an hour before my alarm’ll go off, I open my eyes. Downstairs I hear my dad rushing around getting ready for the morning shift. I get out of bed, pull all my school books out and throw them on the shelf. I pull the clothes I need out of the dresser and cram them in my backpack. Whatever space is left I fill with books.

It goes without saying that I take my guitar.

My uncle lent it to me—a 72 Gibson SG. On a faded sticker on the back, you can just make out the price he paid: 349 crowns, maybe 15 bucks.

I turn off my alarm, since I’m already up.

I sit on my bed and wait. I hear my dad zipping up his jacket. Then the creak of the door.

Dad’s left.

I grab my bag and guitar, walk down the stairs and head to the kitchen. Mom made me lunch for school. It barely fits into my backpack. As always, there’s bus fare on the table. I

stick it in my pocket and rifle through my mom's purse. I snatch three hundred crowns and some change. In the hallway I put on my jacket and tie my shoes.

I check my breast pocket.

That's where I have the letter.

Outside it's snowing gently. I check the thermometer. Five-below-zero. I lock the door and drop the envelope into mailbox.

I skip the bus for once and head straight outside the city where *panelák*ers have their weekend gardens and cottages.

One of 'em will be my temporary home. Bluebeard gave me the keys.

"My parents never go there in winter."

Aside from Bluebeard, Pink Girl's in the know too.

"I'll bring you some food," she promised.

"Ok."

"Don't you want to think this over," she asked.

I shook my head and Pink Girl gave me a hug.

"You're such a dumbass," she laughed.

"Always am."

Then I stretched out my hand and Bluebeard gave me the keys.

Too bad I don't have a headlamp. The city lights don't work out here in the sticks. I can feel snow beneath my feet and occasionally a frozen puddle crackles. When I finally come to the cottage, it's already dawn. I didn't meet a single person on my way here. Off in the distance I see the freeway and the lights of cars speeding the hell away in both directions.

I unlock the door.

It's tiny. Like ten square meters. There are two rooms. I know 'cause I've been here before.

There's a lamp by the bed, and there's a flashlight on one of the shelves. I switch on the lamp and sit down. From my pocket I pull out a pack of Starts and light one up. I look at my backpack and guitar. It's six o'clock AM. Dad's already working. Mom'll get up at eight. Before she opens the shop, she'll walk the dog. Check the mailbox and find my letter.

I read and fuck around on the guitar all day. I try out some songs I've written. I sing quietly, even though the words are meant to be screamed. I don't want anyone to hear me.

At about two-thirty Pink Girl and Bluebeard show up. Right off the bat I start asking if anything is going on back in town. Both shake their heads. No sign of anything yet.

"Brought you some hot dogs," says Bluebeard.

Pink Girl gives me a couple bags of tea and sugar. Two cigarettes too. My friends stay for a bit. They promise that they'll stop by tomorrow at the same time and bring me something.

Then a little later they're already back.

They ran into my mom. She asked if they know anything. Pink Girl says that she was ready to cry.

"She was crying," says Bluebeard.

"No, she wasn't."

"Was too."

"Ok, her eyes were red. She'd probably been crying, but when she was talking to us, she wasn't crying."

"You sure about that?"

"I know what I saw..."

I lie in bed and stare at the yellowish curtain on the window. I think about my mom. I imagine her running from one kid to the next, asking if they've seen me.

Evening plan: reading by flashlight. I decided not to use the lamp. I'm wrapped up in the comforter. There's no heater, so I'm freezing my ass off.

I shut the book.

I get out of bed and go to the window.

I have a view of the main road. A tiny street runs here from it. There's snow on it, but a car could make it, no problem. Whenever I see a headlight slow down, my heart races. But nobody drives down here. I wonder if any of those cars might be the cops. They must be looking for me already. I wonder how many. I really want to smoke, but the cigarettes are going fast. I need to slow down. The two'll be back tomorrow afternoon, but who knows if they'll bring cigarettes. The tobacco situation sucks. Maybe it's time to think about quitting. Where am I supposed to get money for lung darts? I've got almost 500 crowns on me. I'll give 'em money tomorrow to buy me a carton. Yeah, and then they'll stick around.

That's exactly what would happen.

I can't go into town. Everybody knows each other. The whole city probably knows I disappeared.

I think about what I wrote in my goodbye letter. Mainly the last five words: Be good to each other.

What an end. I underlined it twice. It's moving. The whole letter turned out pretty well, but that last sentence—wow.

My mom and dad must have appreciated it.

I look out the window at the main road. I hold the cigarette in my half-closed palm so nobody speeding by at 100 kilometers an hour will notice the cherry glowing in the window.

What if my mom and dad are standing at their window right now? Right next to each other. Holding each other around the shoulders, thinking about my final words. They stare out into the night, hoping for a lone figure to emerge into the streetlights with a pack on his back and a guitar in his hand.

The next day is exactly the same: books, guitar, cigarette, books, cigarette, cigarette. Lying on the table are the untouched tea bags and hot dogs. There's a fruit jar, but now it's filled with ashes and cigarette butts. For the moment, I just huddle under the comforter and stare into space...

A song starts forming. I jot down the individual words and sentences on a piece of paper. It's all about me running away. I'm sitting in a cottage in the middle of the icy countryside. A strange creature comes out at night. I don't know what it looks like because every time I hear it quietly approaching, I bury myself under the covers and hold my breath. I actually don't know if it's about a monster or just someone who's lost. That's how the lyrics should be, really—uncertain, uncomfortable, anxious. The music should be quiet and murky... can music be murky?

That afternoon Pink Girl and Bluebeard come by. At first I thought I wanted to play them the core of the song, but in the end I'd rather hear what Pinkie has to say. Cops came to school and asked about me. They spoke to Pink Girl, Bluebeard, and a couple others.

"What did you tell 'em?"

"Nothin'," Bluebeard answers. "I said I didn't know where you'd go."

I look at Pink Girl. She didn't tell the police anything either. She pulls at my heartstrings, telling me to go home.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I just can't."

"But what'll you do?" Bluebeard asks. "You can stay here 'til spring, max. Then what?"

"I'll go somewhere and get a job," I say unconvincingly.

Pink Girl asks Bluebeard to give us a moment alone. Reluctantly, he puts on his cap and leaves for a bit.

Pink Girl touches me. She tells me I have to go home and make things ok.

"What's done is done."

"Try to undo it then."

The doors open and Bluebeard peeks in.

"If I gotta wait out here, at least gimme a smoke, ok?"

I look at Pink Girl's knees. They're trembling and her palms feel like ice cubes.

Nobody stops me on my way home. I've got my hoodie on and I'm keeping an eye out for cop cars. I don't see a single one.

The house is empty.

I head to my parents' room. The bed is made and the clock is ticking away on the nightstand.

I go to my room, collapse onto the bed and hide underneath the covers.

Then I hear them.

They're outside.

I stand up, go to the edge of the stairs and listen. My parents are telling the police that I came home. They can close the case. One of the cops says something to the effect that everything worked out. Dad makes a comment, but I can't hear it.

I'll have go to the station and do all sorts of shit.

That night mom brings dinner to my room. I barely raise my head from the pillow. Mom lays the plate on the table and stands above me like some silent statue. I'm lying down facing the wall, but still, I know.

"Your dinner's on the table."

"Thanks."

"Don't you want to come downstairs with us? We're watching TV."

"Maybe."

"You know where to find us."

In the middle of the night, I leave my room and go downstairs. I creep into their bedroom. I carefully peer inside.

Aside from two crumpled up blankets, the bed is empty.

At the window stand two unmoving figures staring out into the night, looking at the streetlights.

There's nothing there!

I lose my cool. I stare at the two figures, my parents, and I'm terrified that they'll turn around and look me in the face.

I scramble out of their bedroom in horror and run back to my own.

Rehabilitation

"Whenever you have any sort of problem, you have to tell us about it," dad tells me.

My running away really got to him. Mom too. My brother says that when dad read my farewell letter, his legs gave out. I'm so sorry now. For my mom and dad. I'm sorry they have a son like me. I know it's not easy with me. They'd be happy if I opened up to them—but I'm not going to start opening up to anyone. There's nothing to open up about. I'm fine.

It's pretty clear now that I won't become any sort of cook, not even a waiter. My parents and I had a talk and we figured out that it doesn't make sense for me to keep studying where I am. In September I'll try a different type of school. It's not worth it to suffer for nothing.

No more Oxford for me. For the rest of the year I'm out with "back problems." And I really am going to rehabilitation. Aside from physical therapy, my treatment consists of two main procedures:

I lie on a cot surrounded by machines that blink and beep and look like they were borrowed from the set of one of Cronenberg's horror movies. A nurse who barely talks lays a wet, white pillow against my back and they shock me. The intensity varies.

Sometimes I try to see how much I can take.

After electrotherapy, it's jacuzzi time. I undress and get into a tub of hot water.

"Yeah, we can skip the x-rays," the doctor laughs, "you look like a whippet."

Then she turns some wheel and somewhere below me I hear a loud hum and thousands of bubbles levitate my body and massage the non-existent muscles of my body; they pop in my ears, tickling me, splashing me, shooting me with bubbles.

After that I head home. Most of the time I hitchhike to save money. When I don't have any smokes, I pick up cigarette butts from the bus stop.

(...)

Institute for the Mentally Retarded

So now I have to travel all the way to a different town. I started a new school, a voc-tech. I spent the last half a year at home, and I'm already starting to miss it. Sick-leave is awesome. I'm hoping to get disability out of my scoliosis one day, since I want to really devote myself to leisure and intellectual pursuits.

I'm not going to be a chef. But it wasn't that simple. They needed to close out my grades so at the end of the school year, I went with my mom back to Oxford. Herman showed up to settle some scores. He refused to give me a grade for gym, just to test me one last time. I stood next to my old desk in an empty classroom, with Herman right in front of me. He just gave me this look of fake shock and bitter recognition, like, you're in for a tough life, kid, with your Neanderthal looks and Neanderthal brain.

So in this stupid empty room I had to show him that I can do a somersault, ten push-ups, and then for a while I had to jump in place while flinging my arms up and down. Out of the corner of my eye I could see my mom turning red from anger. It was hard for her to take too. And then when he demanded that I show him the proper way to stretch my cervical vertebrae, mom had enough. She started yelling at Herman—What the hell is this shit show? Why are you trying to make him look stupid? What are you trying to compensate for? Herman just stared at her with his mouth open. He raised his hands and gestured, trying to get her to calm down. I could totally hear it: Ma'am, it's not my fault that you aren't capable of raising or looking after this pitiful creature, this devolved ape. Calm down, ma'am, and don't bring your prehistoric ideas into my PE class. And stop insinuating things. I'm just doing my job since this stunted pile of misery with his all-too-visible identity crisis doesn't have enough grades for the second semester. This, or something pretty close, is what Herman would have said if he weren't scared that my mom would fucking smack him. I'd never seen her like this. She was like Kurt Cobain screaming the chorus of "Smells Like Teen Spirit." And it worked. Shaken, Herman jotted something down in his notebook and the problem with my lack of grades was solved. A few minutes later, the esteemed janitor of Oxford was leading us out of the school.

In the end I got a D in gym, just like in all my other classes.

In my new class there are twenty-three girls and two boys. I sit motionless at my desk and I'm either staring straight ahead or I'm closing my eyes. Occasionally, one of the girls will turn around, look at me, elbow her neighbor to point out the weird and lonely thing growing into its chair, and then they both burst out laughing. They say nothing to me, just giggle.

My hair is longer than most of theirs.

The boys peek into the classroom. They shout to the girls. All those big gestures. Sometimes during the break I'll take a walk out into the hall. On the stairwell a group of disco-hair guys stands around. They blow me kisses and call me sweetheart.

There's no way I'll be joining the girls in the gym. Thanks to a doctor's note for my scoliosis, I've weaseled my way to freedom. I don't have to exercise.

So for PE I spend my time in the dressing room reading. Once I went to go see the girls exercising. I watched their breasts bounce. Some girls had big soft ones—they'd almost hit their chins when they ran. Others had smaller ones that looked firmer. They only jiggled a little, and seemed kind of springier. Then there were other girls who didn't have anything at all to jiggle or bounce. A couple of them had their sweats painted on and cut into their crotch. Thin and fat bodies. Asses round like apples and jiggly like Jell-O. All kinds. Panting, sweaty, grunting PE. The gym teacher yelling theatrically:

"Legs up! That's it, that's it, no slacking off! Let's do one more round! Come on!"

The girls are exhausted, strands of hair glued to their sweaty faces.

Sometimes I go for a smoke on the roof of the gym. It faces the main building of the school and has a perfect view into the principal's office. The principal is an ex-boxer. He likes to handle things matter-of-factly. From the rooftop I often watch his famous left hook knock out the losers of IMR, the school's abbreviation. Institute for the Mentally Retarded. At least once a month they have to repaint the principal's office. The walls are flecked with blood and in the plaster they even found a couple teeth.

Klepto

I was around four years old when I stole something for the first time—a peanut cookie from Stejk's convenience store.

At that time my grandmother was taking care of me, and as soon as I showed her my catch, she told me it was wrong and went back to return it. Gradually, I moved from cookies to books. I steal primarily for economic reasons, and also because I just want something of my very own. I raid libraries and bookstores, the new ones and the old used rare ones too. The first thing is to spot the camera, then make sure your belt is loose, you have a big breast pocket or a messenger bag. I've got an advantage, because wherever I go, nobody really notices me. Like I'm invisible. Small books are better to go for.

After all these years, I've gotten pretty good.

One of my missions will probably go like this:

I've got something in my veins and my aim is clear. There are no cameras, and there are bunch of shelves, making it easy to hide from the one saleslady. I wear a hoodie with a big front pocket that's about two sizes too big. There are about six customers, all with their noses in books. I usually go straight to the literature section. Before I came along the poetry of Gregory Corso and Burrough's *Junkie* were just lying out.

In biographies I notice a familiar face.

My heart is thumping.

For the longest time I've needed a book about Kurt Cobain. But I'm too visible right now. Mainly I have to keep cool. I go to the rack and pull out another book. I pretend to read it, but really I'm checking out the situation. I'm only about two meters from the sales counter. The book is pretty big and it'd be easy to see in my pocket, so I'm going to have to stick it down my pants. Inconspicuously I loosen my belt. I do it by pretending I'm getting a tissue out of my pocket. The saleswoman is looking at her computer screen and is typing something on the keyboard. She's not paying any attention to me, and she's making a big mistake there. I put the book back into rack and reach for Cobain. I glance at the counter one last time and then the book is mine. I've got one hand in my pocket to hold the book and my pants up. I move around slowly and customerly and hide behind a rack of cookbooks where I can buckle my belt. I just amble around for a while. I don't want to disappear too fast. That might draw attention.

When I'm outside, then I can celebrate. Maybe buy some two-buck chuck.

When I'm a rock star, I'll write an autobiography. I'll publish it with some small failing publishing house, and my book will put them back on the map. When my book comes out, I'll go to the bookstores and steal every copy.

(...)

Ibogaine

Finally things have been set in motion. Me, Composer, and Bluebeard decided to start a band. We meet up at Composer's apartment. He lives with his mom and little brother. Bluebeard has a few songs and I'm writing lyrics for them. Everybody's role is pretty clear:

Bluebeard – guitar

Composer – bass

Me – singer

We rehearse the songs in the bedroom Composer shares with his little brother. So the harsh songs reverberate off all the kid's model airplanes, cars, tanks, plastic soldiers and monsters while he runs around hitting us with a hockey stick and enjoying himself thoroughly.

Luckily composer's mom is fine with cigarettes, so during our breaks we usually bum a couple Petra Lights off her, light up in the kitchen, and listen to Nirvana. We hang our shaggy heads, exhale pensively and soak up the music.

Here and there we remark on something. Like:

"Kurt's killing it here."

"Hmm. Where'd the lighter go?"

"He might not be able to really sing, but nobody else sings his songs as well as him."

"Exactly!"

"My stomach hurts."

"Yeah, mine too."

"Kurt had stomachaches all the time."

"His spine was screwed up too."

"Hey, does anyone know where the lighter is?"

Kurt's been dead for eight years. He ended it with a shotgun blast. Conspiracy theories abound, though. They say his wife had him killed.

"Before he killed himself, he shot up with a golden fix," I tell my colleagues.

"What's that?"

"The last fix. It's enough that it kills you. In that state it's not clear how he could even lift the shotgun, not to mention aim it and fire."

"Fuckin' A—imagine the cleanup?"

"Supposedly he hung a sheet behind him so his blood and brains wouldn't get all over the walls. All real musicians should kill themselves. That's what I'm gonna do. Twenty-seventh birthday and boom."

"At twenty-seven we'll be stars."

"Let's do group suicide. We'll become legends."

"Why won't the fucking lighter work?"

We talk a lot about our band. We need to get ahold of some real instruments and gear. Bluebeard is ok. He's already got an electric guitar and an amp. Composer'll have to buy everything. I need a mic and a PA. Then we need drums—they're the most expensive.

"We still need to come up with a name. Broken Strings is lame," I say.

"And what do you want us to call ourselves?"

We like the name Nirvana. It's perfect. But, of course, that band already existed. We're sad about it, and feel a little cheated. It should've been our name.

Then Composer says it:

"What about Ibogaine?"

"What's that?"

"A substance found in some plants, but mainly in iboga. African medicine men used it to treat different addictions," Composer explains.

We like how it sounds. Dark and menacing. It's grunge as fuck.

We'll be like a medicine for this rotten age of obnoxious ads, commercial television, preservatives, arrogance, alcohol and drugs, economic crises and nuclear threats.

We are Ibogain.

I get chills.

"We have to celebrate our new name," I say.

We turn our pockets inside-out. Together we've got about seventy crowns. That will get us two liters of pre-vinegar. Then we can go hang out by the pipes. Maybe someone will have a joint there.

You're Unbelievable!

In school we have these electric typewriters, and we're learning to type with all ten fingers. It's timed too. There are all these secret codes like "jafa," "dafa," and "kajak." I'm actually pretty good—I have nice long fingers.

It's tough for me to be in a class full of girls. I'm never gonna be one of them, so I don't even try. I just wait out the clock, catch a bus and go home.

Sometimes it's fun, though. The girls argue a lot. They're really vulgar. I've seen a real catfight. They were fighting over some guy, then they jumped on each other and started tearing out hair. I couldn't believe how brutal they were.

And they fight normally too: fists to the face, kicks in the stomach.

During the lessons they put on their makeup. They dump their books on the floor and their desks become cosmetics counters: palettes, mirrors, files, brushes, tweezers, and other instruments. One girl confides to another that she had oral sex with her boyfriend. She's afraid she may have gotten pregnant from it. Seriously. She's freaking out and ready to cry.

They're always spraying themselves with perfume or hairspray. The whole class reeks of it.

I wonder if such a feminine environment is having an adverse effect on my psychological development. Sometimes I have headaches from all their squawking.

I'm desperate.

I want to tell 'em to shut up.

But I'm scared of what would happen. Fists to the face, kicks in the stomach. As far as my psychological development goes, that'd be pretty fucking adverse.

I follow the girls to PE. I hang back a couple meters and pretend that I don't belong to them. They go into the gym and I stand outside to finish my cigarette. All the sudden a gym teacher on a bike goes by. He doesn't seem to notice me, so I keep on smoking. Apparently, I gauged the situation incorrectly. After a couple seconds he comes back out of the gym and immediately starts in:

"What the heck?"

I don't know how to respond. We just kind of stare at each other.

"You going to put that out?"

"Huh?"

"You're unbelievable. You see I'm here, I even give you a couple seconds to put out your cigarette, and you don't even go into the locker room. You don't even care!"

I don't say anything. I just watch how red he's getting—it looks dangerous.

"Put it out!" he screams.

I stub it out on the wall and flick it behind me.

"Oh, no way!" He goes nuts. "How dare you trash the school building!"

"Huh?"

"Gimme thirty push-ups!"

I remind him that I have scoliosis—that's the whole reason I don't have PE.

This information apparently makes such an impression on him that his right eye begins to twitch.

“Get in there, on the double! Who do you think you are, mister?!”

Mr. Herman thought I was going through an identity crisis, that I didn't know who I am.

But I do.

I'm:

Cobain

Lennon

Morrison

Kerouac

Jagger

Belmondo

Bruce Lee

Clint Eastwood

Ginsberg

Corso

Vinnetou

Mom

John Wayne

Neal Cassady

Burroughs

Vicius

Rimbaud

Dad

Old Shatterhand

Rotten

Nick Cave

Rocky Balboa

Brother

Bob Dylan

Bukowski

d'Artagnan

Syd Barrett

Iggy Pop

Sister

Eddie Vedder

Rambo

Captain Nemo

Filip Topol

Ian Curtis

Lou Reed

Batman

Layne Staley

and Sandokan all together.

My homeroom teacher thinks I'm a pig. She's already called my mom because of it. Mom freaks out. As soon as I get home I have to give her all my clothes so she can wash them. She then says I need to take a bath. From now on, I'll take a bath everyday. There's no excuse to skip it. I ask mom what the teacher told her. She said I reek of alcohol and cigarettes, I'm always staring off into space, and, oh, and I go around in ripped clothes. But that's like my uniform, I protest. Mom's not a fan of the topic. She doesn't want to discuss it any further today. She looks at me. She doesn't understand why I carry around dirt in my pockets.

By the time math ends, I'm going through serious withdrawal. It doesn't help that I had to go up to the board and do a word problem. Of course I couldn't do it, so I got an F. As soon as the bell rings I want to bolt out in front of school and light up a smoke. I'm stressed because I

hate it here. I suck at school; I don't study; I just want to read but they won't let me; I have to pay attention and show interest in things that don't interest me.

I go to the stairwell. Like always, I let my hair hang down in front of my eyes. It means walking around blind, but I do it so no one can really look at me. It doesn't work today. Someone's hand grabs me by the collar. I turn around. It's one of the disco-hair guys. I try to break loose, but it's hopeless. He's way stronger than me. I'm guessing he doesn't sit around drinking box wine and he probably eats right. I bet he plays football and fucks. He's probably not exhausted from jerking off all the time.

He's still got ahold of me and he takes off running to the girls' bathroom where he has two jocks waiting. They open the doors and toss me onto the cold tiles like a dirty towel. Three girls are standing in front of the mirror, but they're staring at me. I say excuse me, get up quickly and head to the door. I grab the handle, but nothing. The motherfuckers are holding it shut. In the meantime the girls have started screaming their heads off.

"Get out!"

"I can't—someone's blocking the door."

"Get out, you dick!"

"I can't."

"You're such a fucking loser!"

I feel the tears well up. With all my strength I slam down the handle. Nothing. The girls keep yelling at me. I put all my weight onto it; my feet in their ragged socks are wobbling on the ground. All the sudden the handle goes loose and I fall straight on my ass. My spine feels like it shatters into a million pieces. I get up off the floor as fast as I can. There's a ton of people out in the hall, all watching me come out of the ladies room holding my ass. They see my beet-red face. I'm about to lose it.

"Where ya been, sweetheart?" asks the guy who dragged me there.

I shoulder my way through a crowd of greasers. They throw crumpled paper at my head. Someone's hand pulls at my hair. I get back to my class and sit at my desk. Just don't cry, I tell myself, just don't cry.

From the bus station I watch a truck that's flipped over. It's on its side and it's surrounded by dead pigs. Some survived and are running around in panic. Guys are chasing them and hitting them with sticks. The corpses glimmer in the afternoon sun.