

The End of the World by Emil Hakl

Originally I just went over on some errands. I rang the doorbell of a fancy door in a comfortable bourgeois apartment building near the embankment, one of those typical buildings where the residents still remember the reprisals after Heydrich's assassination in 1942. The peep hole turned dark for a moment, then the door chain rattled.

A thin woman going on forty opened the door. She had bags under her eyes and her mouth was enlarged by lipstick to an unbelievable size. She was wearing a skirt and a completely see-through black blouse with nothing underneath. I tried not to look at her breasts there in the door but despite my good intentions I began to address them, "Hello, I'm ..."

The breasts answered in unison in an unexpectedly husky two-toned voice, "Hi!"

Somehow it all fit together so I didn't find it very surprising. The breasts said, "Don't take your shoes off, just come in!"

The woman offered me her hand, shook her bracelets and without further ado went to make coffee. She jabbered from the kitchenette non-stop. From what she was telling me I felt like the last time I saw her was two days ago. She had the incredible ability to talk about several things at the same time. "Have a seat ... you sitting? ... Jirka was here, he ... looks like that actor ... Drtina ... he's a bit jealous of me, you know and ... I wanted to go to see *Prattling Snail* ... but he won't take me there, he says he might bump into ... this Machytka guy there, he owes him some money or somethin', I think he played cards with someone and lost, he doesn't tell me everything ... you might probably know him; ... so all these days I just feel, I don't wanna say lonely, but ... I was in the National Theatre's ballet for fifteen years, you know ... I danced in the corps de ballet, so I was used to having people around, and ... I wanted ... do you take milk in your coffee? ... I wanted to try something on my own, something I'd enjoy, but Ivan ... he's all right, I respect him, but he's not reliable and he tends to ... I don't wanna say use people, you know, but I watch out for him, you wanna see the pictures? Wait they must be here somewhere ..."

Cigarette in hand she started to rummage through the shelves until a big pile of papers, envelopes and letters tumbled down. Pictures from one of the envelopes fell on the carpet, "Here they are ... so here, see ... The Nation to Itself ... this is me ... just a few years younger ..."

There she was on the large black and white damaged photographs in ballet tights, with a nervous smile, a long narrow nose on her pale face, thin, ten years younger, pretty. And unlike in real life, one thing was apparent, some kind of obvious, irresistible magic; she emanated sweet perfume, make-up, alcohol, sleeping pills, mothballs and vanity.

She laughed, "Do you like me here ... actually ... a funny thing to ask, I mean do you feel that ... Ivan told me you perform or performed at Dobeška, he also performed at Vašinka's but that was way back, he said that ... here, you see we were rehearsing Vest Sajt Story, but it didn't go through in the end, 'cause it was directed by a ... he defected to Austria, they almost fired me because of that 'cause you know ... you know Marek? ..."

"No".

She pulled a started bottle of vodka from the freezer, "I see, I thought ... last week I went for a walk at Letná, a friend of mine lives there, her brother jumped under a train a month ago, he jumped to the tracks from a little bridge but he didn't kill himself, he was just unconscious and that's when the motor train ran over him, the engineer didn't notice a thing, and he lay

there on the tracks with his legs cut off, they were sliced off right here” she drew her dark red painted nail across her thin thigh. “He was still alive for half an hour when they found him, by then the poor man’s hair was white, he had turned completely grey in that little while, he died on them in the ambulance, so you can see how she must ... they grew up together and this year they found a growth in her breast, and last year, you see, their mother gassed herself to death, so you can ... we went ... I went for a walk by the Hanavský Pavillion, near Šebesták’s place, have you been there? He’s the way he is, I actually quite like him, even though I’d certainly have a reason to be avoiding him, which is an old story ... you’re not drinking at all! Is there something you want?”

“If you had some Tylenol ...”

“I mean in life, if there’s something ...you want!”

Both breasts were casting a mysterious downward look at me from underneath the chiffon while becoming sharper and sharper.

She pointed at a shiny, worn leather chair standing in front of the piano. It was black, studded with iron hob-nails on each side, and it was bleak and solid like the easy-chair from the SS villa in the movie *The Higher Principle*. Judging by the dust-bunnies that floated and rolled around the keyboard cover every time one of us spoke a little louder, no one had played the piano in a long time.

“The chair is after Nezval, d’you know Nezval, the poet... ?

“Yeah.”

“My parents got it ...from his estate. Do you like Nezval?”

How could I not like that prominosed phantom of the Czechoslovak operetta, who’d feed on chocolate cream puffs, Choux Paste, cream horns and pralines under any regime! How could I not like that salon bushman who’d pose in his swimsuit pulled all the way above his navel at the Sázava river; that tearful prince with the body of a mother of four, whose melancholy and conceited self-love eventually brought about the blooming peonies of the *Edison* and *Wondrous Magician* poems whose fragrance one can smell to this day ...!

“So have a seat there, if you want ...”

“Thanks. I’ll stay here ...”

Turning into a pussycat she pouted her lips, “Why don’t you sit there a bit for meee...”

It struck me that perhaps she wanted to get me drunk, tie me to the easy chair so that she could go on telling me whatever came to her mind until I slowly went insane. She’ll feed me spaghetti without ketchup and pour *pigi* tea into me to keep me alive for a few days. Or perhaps I reminded her of her deceased father who spent the last fifteen years of his life in that chair.

I sat down in the chair. That same moment she pulled two bottles of white wine from the fridge, “I found some Riesling ... would you like some?”

Buried in the trap made of squeaky leather polished shiny by the fat buttocks of a poet, I listened to her rambling, cooing and rattling. For a good hour I didn’t hear what she was saying, fascinated by her uneasy facial expressions. Her lips would occasionally form a slow and cynical “s”. Now and then they would conjure up a big “oh”. Occasionally they would

utter “yep that’s how it is...!” She looked like a girl who’d secretly rummaged through her mother’s make-up and defiantly plastered a big red mouth on top of her lips in the hall mirror. She wasn’t in control. That made her different from most other women. She looked like a clown and she behaved like one, too. She kept dropping things. Spilled her coffee. Burned a hole in the couch with her cigarette. Burned a hole through the curtain when she was looking out the window. She was a handshake between joy and terror.

The bookcase was full of rolls of paper, boxes, empty bottles, dusty teddy-bears. On one shelf was a book bound in brown cloth, its title in Cyrillic script reading, “Alisa v strane chudyes”.

There were light showers outside, then the weather turned nice, then darkness began to fall. Time for a cozy chat in the twilight. I went to take a leak. In the washroom I happened to cast my eyes under the sink upon a basket filled to the brim with used pads. I studied this intriguing phenomenon with detachment. The bottom layers were all shriveled and caked together while the top ones must have been just a few hours old. I thought again of the poet Nezval; and as well about the sculptor Gebauer with his unhealthy grey parrots stuffed into too small wire cages. I returned to the room and sank again into the wing chair. Being in a cobweb might not be all that uncomfortable ...depending on the circumstances. And circumstances are fortunately almost always clear only in hind-sight.

I dropped by a bar to buy her cigarettes. When I came back she was finishing up the wine. “I ... wanna go to bed ... if you want ... you can stay here ... I mean if ... well, it’s up to you ...”

I hastily brushed my teeth with a frayed toothbrush and this time tried not to look at the basket under the sink.

She lay on an open couch in her nightie. Under the nightie her ballet legs were nicely folded with her thin ankles encircled by clear blue aristocratic veins. I lay beside her. I pulled the blanket over myself. Under the blanket we grabbed each other and that was that.

At one point I realized that the whole room had turned a hundred and eighty degrees. I knew not how I’d achieved that but I felt like a death rider turning in the middle of a sweet cloud of burnt gasoline in a wire globe in the middle of an arena. To my amazement I realized that I was leaning with my feet against the book case in a handstand while she’s nicely hooked up into me crosswise, moving fast, fast, the sweat pouring out of our bodies like water and her cracked voice rattling up close into my ear, “It’s nice ... like this... isn’t it ...”

We were doing rolls of sorts, turning summersaults of sorts and flips... I could see that she was indeed a ballerina. She had danced half her life away in the National Theatre, while I had drunk it away in bars. Her thin trained body had its own idea about what it wanted, it had a mind of its own. A couple of hours later I fainted, to tell the truth. She brought me back to life a few more times and everything was repeated from scratch. It started to rain again. Moths flew into the room through the open window to save themselves from drowning.

The sun was shining again in the morning. With great exertion I opened my peepers. Her head lay on a pillow beside me, watching me. Cutting straight to the chase she remarked, “Please ... don’t say anything...”

I went into the bathroom and put my head under the cold shower. It helped for a bit.

I was so mixed up that I wrote down my phone number for her without being asked. Then I went to work four hours late.

About two weeks later Karel Bursík, who relieved me at work, told me “Hans, you got a call from some writer or something ... she spent half an hour telling me about some ... well ... she wants you to call her at this number ...”

He said it while disapprovingly peering out the window. He uttered the word “writer” in a way that didn’t make me want to ask anything more. I felt branded with shame but didn’t know what for. After he left I put water on for coffee, fed and scratched the two cats that were milling about my feet and dialed the number. I could hear the crackling from Podolí, “Hi, I called you at work but you weren’t there, so I ... But instead there was some ... very nice man, we had a really good chat ...”

“What about?”

“That’s a secret ... Among other things about you ... if you’d like, I’ll fill you in on it when you come and visit me ... I mean if you want ... to come and visit me ...”

I knew that I shouldn’t go there, which is precisely why I knew I would in the end.

I walked along the embankment and thought of dozens of things I would rather be doing that very moment. In the middle of my thoughts I entered her building. A terribly fat woman was toiling up the stairs, resting every three steps and gasping for breath, and she managed it just so that she could see the door I’d stopped in front of, wiped the sweat off her forehead and shot at me, “Looking for someone!?”

I rang the doorbell. A pale little face with lipstick like a squished carnation appeared in the gap as the door opened. “Hi.”

In the hall I was engulfed in a cloud of perfume. She was wearing a peculiar denim jacket that went down to her feet and had at least twenty five large carefully closed red buttons. She looked like a vivandiere. “That’s Stoklasová ... a nosy bitch ... You’ll have some coffee right ... I’ve had four already ... but I’ll have one with you ... Jirka was here, you know ... so I’m a bit nervous but please ignore that ... I was gonna ask you if you’d be into taking a steamboat trip up to the Slapy dam on Saturday, some of my former colleagues will be there, but you don’t need to worry ... Brigita would love to meet you ... I think it will be ... nice ... I just hope that the Machytka guy won’t show up, I hear he ... wants the money from me ...”

I went right to the black chair to sit not waiting to be asked. We chatted for a while. Then she expressed a wish to go for a walk with me.

The sidewalks were virtually deserted. She was clicking beside me like a geisha, still wearing the jacket buttoned all the way down, with her bare feet in half-crazy bright red shoes. I thought the only place we could go like this without attracting too much attention would be the Matějská Fair ... we’d surely look swell me and her at the chair swing. She locked her arm into mine. I was wearing an old worn-out leather jacket, originally with overstuffed shoulder padding that I had cut a few large strips of foam from the places I managed to get through to; I went on to wear the jacket for ten years without being able to admit to myself that there were terribly shriveled superfluous bags hanging from my shoulders. Now I could see it in a shop window as we crossed a street: her big mouth that never stopped chattering, and beside her someone wearing a stiff smile, nodding and obligingly wearing his rigid insect sleeve arching skyward, with her hanging on to it with both hands.

We looked like characters from a Hungarian movie. As if the two of us were quietly trying to sort out some Budapest problems of ours. In this way we walked all the way to the botanical

garden. The gate was open. We went in. It was deserted. Dry palm-trees were swaying in wooden planters. Galingales were crackling. Rhododendrons were blooming.

She leaned against the trunk of a yellow poplar. "You wanna ... see something?"

I looked at her and saw that whatever happened now would have the significance of a premeditated plan. I nodded. She undid a button at her neck, then another one, and another. She undid all twenty five. Her eyes became peaceful. There was nothing but the reflection of the silent pit of the blue sky. She wore nothing under her coat. I saw everything that had gone unnoticed before. She must have weighed about forty kilos. Above her pitiful dog-like ribs, her two breasts stuck out screaming for help. Her stomach was lined with a tangle of deep scars, it looked as if it had been cut up and then stitched back together. From bellow her girly protruding pelvis furiously peered a spooky hairy bugaboo. It looked as if it was about to speak. I instinctively turned off my brain because whatever might come from it would hurt her. I did the only thing that was left for me to do: I opened my pants and, right then and there, in a more or less open space, began to bang her. She spread her legs as if she wanted to fly away. She hooked herself into me without a word, tears streaming down her face. I was wiping them and smearing about her face some purple shit she'd used to paint it.

Not far from us stood a guy in a checkered shirt staring right at us. There was no expression worth mentioning in his face. He just stood there, stared, and kept silent. All I could do was ignore him.

She cut her nails into my back creating ten deep gashes from which my lazy-city-boy blood began to stream down my pants. An unlikely fragrance emanated from the yellow poplar's blossoms. I kissed her repeatedly not knowing how else to pacify her, yet I feeling that by doing so I was breaking through the last thin door to her desperation, which was the last thing I wanted. Wads of cotton wool went through my mind. Large sheets of meaningless bullshit billowed out as far as the eye could see. The city was squeaking, swaying and floating on the face of the earth on and on. Nobody really knew why they were living. In the pubs shots of hard liquor shone and tacky jokes sparkled around. Red hot shots of the "shine and burn out" type continuously flew above a cooling-down mash of the human spirit. Men tortured women with their inexplicable silence. Women tortured men with irrational reproaches. Children in kindergarten already knew how to make each other's lives most miserable. Nobody had the faintest idea what was awaiting them the next day. They were all afraid to think about it yet they all had to think about it. That created a peculiar surface tension; that was the best thing of all. They were all certain this could not yet be the end of the world, because this was not what the end of the world looked like. They knew from the movies what it might look like. Some had an inkling that with a bit of fantasy it could all come about differently ... but even they were wrong. Everybody was still missing the most fundamental fact, which is that the world cannot possibly end for everybody at once; just for each person individually. Because reality is nothing but a combination of wishes and hopes. The end of the world is an entirely personal category. What seems like the end of the world to one, might to another be a reason to open a bottle to celebrate the real thing.

The guy in the checkered shirt was still standing there. He didn't move an inch. I didn't care. I kneeled and buried my nose in the living bugaboo. On and on I licked her silent weeping cunt and felt like melting into the sadness, the mess, the eternity, the ever-revolving-all-crushing combine of expectations and disappointments; but I couldn't. I was no Hyperion. I lost any courage.

I stood in the botanical garden in the middle of the day embracing a loudly crying naked forty year-old woman. I was thirty two. Large leaves of strange trees and bushes rustled in the wind.

The guy in the shirt had disappeared.

I buttoned up her jacket. I gave her a handkerchief to wipe off the smudges on her face. I had no idea that my own mug looked like that of a baboon thanks to her lipstick.

I left her standing there and left. With confusion in my soul I went out onto the street full of idiots like me. I felt better among them. They were the only ones with whom I had anything at all to talk about.