

***Unopened Letters* by Alice Horáčková**

Translated by Andrew Oackland

The Life of a Woman Called Alena

You're wondering why I haven't opened the letters, aren't you?

There's something about the writing I don't like. I'm pretty sure it's a woman's. So I didn't even take them from the drawer, I just slammed it shut. Whenever I'm in Jára's room, it's a struggle for me to hold things together. The last time I opened his door, it all hit me so quickly that I burst into tears. The doctor told me I'd be hypersensitive like this for a year at least. As you see, the year's almost up and I still say things like, 'This is where we live.'

When did I find the letters, you ask? When I went in there to clean, for the first time in ages. I always tried to move around like a ghost, so as not to bother him, but he'd bark at me to get out all the same.

What got into me, that I started going through his drawers? I'd never done it before, I'd never have presumed. I suppose I thought I'd just tidy up a bit. He has a sink in there, and the tap was dripping. The letters were right at the top of the drawer. Anyway, I'm not going to open them. I don't care about what's in them. It's Jára's business, and I don't want to stick my nose in. When the weather's a bit better, I'll drive out to the cottage and burn some old stuff. And I'll throw those letters on the fire.

Or would you like to read them first?

Early morning in the wine shop

I like coming to wine shops like this. Better in the afternoon, of course, but I have my French class then. Will you have a cup of coffee and a small glass of wine with me, Mrs Dvořáková? It *is* Missus, not Miss, isn't it?

Oh, I see, you don't have your husband's name either. It was the same with me. People just couldn't get their heads around it. Some didn't take it in and called by Jára's surname anyway. I realize you're not married. Given the choice, I wouldn't have married either. It's always best to stand on your own two feet.

I can hardly wait to find out what you want to talk to me about and how I can help you. Do you need putting in touch with someone I know? As I was getting ready this morning, it occurred to me that it might be about Jára. It is, isn't it?

You want to write about *me*? Honestly? I wouldn't have thought that in a million years! But I'm not sure it's the best idea, Mrs Dvořáková. I'm not really myself at the moment. It's a year this week since Jára passed, you know. I've still got his ashes on the table at home. I just can't face all the arrangements and the paperwork.

Did I have any idea that Jára's end was near, you ask?

None at all. We were at a restaurant celebrating his seventy-fifth birthday when he started coughing. Before long, he was bright red in the face, wheezing and struggling for breath. A lady tried to give him the kiss of life – she was a doctor, we found out later. Jára just lay there, not moving, losing consciousness. All the family was there. Klára and her Tonda. And the grandkids, who were crying like mad.

Who called the ambulance? I did. It got to us very quickly, within five minutes, I'd say. And you should have seen the doctor who got out of it! A proper Rambo, he was. The biceps, the height, the broad shoulders. And he was as black as the ace of spades. He took a good look around, then grabbed Jára by the scruff of the neck, threw him up in the air and turned him this way and that. And as Jára was spinning, a peanut-sized piece of meat flew out of him. Once he'd drawn breath into his lungs, Rambo gave him a good slap on the back. No one was in any doubt that the ebony-skinned doctor had saved Jára's life.

They always find something wrong with you in hospital, as I'm sure you know. This time, they discovered Jára had a heart problem. This came as a surprise to me – I'd always thought he exaggerated his illnesses. Whenever he complained of a pain here or an ache there, I'd threaten to get Maryša in. Maryša is a brilliant doctor and such a strong woman that she's practically a guy – in Africa, she brought down child mortality by forty per cent... The only living creature ever to get the better of Maryša was her hound of the Baskervilles. Once, at the cottage, we tied it to the cooker. Jára was sitting on the sofa, and it tried to jump on there to join him, cooker and all. Anyway, whenever I told Jára that Maryša was coming to take a look at him, he would start feeling better immediately.

A few years went by. It was winter, and Jára was painting angels. For the past two years, he hadn't painted anything but. Most of them were a dazzling yellow. One of them he didn't finish until the day before Christmas. I had no way of knowing it would be his last.

Jára liked to paint at the cottage, where he had his studio in the old granary. He was airing the place out one day when he caught pneumonia. I treated him at home, but then he started to struggle for breath, so he had to go to hospital. Jára hated hospitals. I'd hardly got him in the place than he signed himself out again. But we didn't have breathing apparatus at home, so they took him back to hospital. No sooner had they fixed him up to an air supply than the life flooded back into him. 'I feel loads better, Alena!' he told me. 'I feel like I should be painting!'

I believed what he was telling me. Jára had this amazing vitality in him. He always bounced back and threw himself into things while those around him were still finding their feet. The day after they admitted him, I phoned him at the hospital to ask if he needed anything.

He didn't, he said. He asked when I was coming in. I just needed to pack a few things and I'd be with him within the hour, I told him. Did he need a toothbrush? A second pair of pyjamas? How about some fruit? Or some orange juice? Jára didn't answer any of these questions – the doctor had just come to see him.

I don't know how much later it was – it could have been half an hour, it could have been ten minutes – when the phone rang. I expected it to be Jára, but the voice was a woman's, and

she wanted to speak to Alena, and I said that was me. She was very sorry, she said, she didn't know quite how to break it to me, but something had happened to my husband...

What on earth was she on about? Hadn't I spoken to Jára a few minutes ago? What she was telling me couldn't be true. They must have got the names mixed up and mistaken someone else for Jára.

I yelled words to this effect at the lady doctor. More screamed them, really. This had hit me out of the blue, and I was livid. I had to get the anger out, and I had no one else to turn it on. What have you done to me, Jára? How *could* you? Why didn't you wait for me? Why didn't you say goodbye? Couldn't you have let me know? Couldn't you have held on just a little while longer? I was going to book you in at the spa in Poděbrady for next week – I told you as much. Remember how much it helped last time, how you really pulled yourself together...

The receiver was swinging from my hand. I didn't have the strength to put it down. Silly or what? Why hadn't I booked a spa stay last autumn? If I had, things might have turned out very different.

At the hospital, they told me they weren't going to do a postmortem – even though they weren't sure what Jára had actually died of. Incredible, eh? Anything goes here. I still don't know if Jára died of an embolism or if his lungs or heart gave out.

Well, you know how it often is in life. There are drivers and there are passengers. My husband was of the second kind. To be honest, I was a passenger too. Scatterbrained, impractical – my lovers used to take care of me. Do that, Alena. Go there, Alena. But when I met Jára, I had to man up.

Where did we first see each other? On those steps in Paris. But we didn't get together until we were back in Prague. At Binders' wine shop. I hardly recognized him, he was looking so chubby. It was my girlfriend who pointed him out. 'Look,' she said. 'Isn't that the lad you were talking to in Paris?'

Jára had longer hair, glasses and a dreamy look in his eye. He was always striking-looking, with the kind of face that stays with you. But I'm really bad with faces. After we left the wine shop, we ambled over Charles Bridge. We looked at the statues, the water, the weir. It was a warm evening. Jára burst out, 'Once, Alena, I saw a really weird picture. It showed a tree growing out of that very weir. Just imagine!'

I wondered what kind of tree could grow out of a weir. At its strangeness. At how wonderful it was. 'Do you know what, Alena?' Jára said. 'I'm going to plant that tree for you!' He made promises like they were going out fashion – always did – but as I'd had a few drinks, I latched on to the promise. I latched on to Jára, too.

And that's when my life started getting difficult. I say difficult, but I think we all have our cross to bear. Some of us would climb a mountain to reach it, on all fours if need be. We definitely wouldn't choose a different one.

[...]

A small glass over the way

It's after five, and according to the ancient Tibetans, that's when you can start drinking. Besides, the Sardinian wine they serve here at the Onion has quite a reputation... Plus, I've got something for you, Mrs Dvořáková.

No, it's not the unopened letters. But when you and I were rooting around in Jára's room, I remembered a notebook I'd hidden somewhere, with a red Ferrari on the cover... The Museum of Czech Literature is on to me to hand all this kind of stuff over, but I'll ask them to wait a bit. Where was it, you ask? Upstairs behind the suitcases. I had to stand on a stool to get to it.

So, what would you like to hear about today? The woman I had to get out of Jára's studio? Really? I'll tell you, I don't mind. After all this time, even I think it's pretty funny.

How did it start? Well, Jára just stopped going to the studio. Which was fishy to me – an artist's studio is his sanctuary, and an artist's wife who barges in won't be that artist's wife for long. Anyway, there was Jára sitting around at home, and me not saying a word about it – until the electricity bill arrived. For five hundred, it was – that's ten times the monthly rent we were paying on the place. I did have a word with Jára then. 'What's the meaning of this bill? You don't even go to the studio!' And Jára said: 'Yes I do!' To which I replied: 'I can see that you don't!'

So much did Jára not want to tell me, he was practically squirming. But then it came out that he wasn't going to the studio much because some woman he sort of knew had moved into it. Some woman he sort of knew? Who, for God's sake? But before I could say anything, Jára was jabbering away. 'But Alena! It's not what you think! She didn't have anywhere to live, she's got nobody, she has to do everything on her own!' The thing was, she'd been in the studio over two months by then, and still she didn't have the means to find another place... Anyway, in the end Jára let it slip that he'd no idea how to get her out of the place.

Did I flip my lid? No, I rarely do that. I was glad to know what was going on. Besides, I still didn't know who this woman was and where she worked. But it wasn't long before I found out. Her name was Irena, and she worked for the Krátký Film studios. In the end, Jára was good enough to give me her office phone number.

When I called this Irena the next morning, she picked up immediately. I took care to speak slowly and choose my words carefully, like a real lady. But I'm sure my voice was shaking when I said, 'My husband informed me yesterday that you are currently using his studio as your place of residence, making it impossible for him to paint, and my husband needs to paint. Would you kindly help me resolve the situation?' Then I asked her ever so politely whether she happened to have the keys to Jára's studio on her. If so, she might meet me at two that afternoon by the entrance to the Time cinema and give them to me straight away.

What was I expecting from this Irena? That she'd make a scene and we'd have an argument and maybe even go for each other's hair. But she took things as they came. She explained nothing, apologized for nothing, and she gave me the keys to the studio. It didn't escape my notice that she was a woman with appetites.

After that, Irena disappeared – not just from Jára's studio, but from Krátký Film and Czechoslovakia too. I heard that she went to live with someone in the West. Years later, when Jára changed his studio and I was clearing the old place out, I discovered she'd left something behind for me in one of the drawers. A shiny pink massage attachment...

That's how things were with us. Are you surprised? Young people have no idea, I can tell you.

[...]

At the Onion

That time we were drinking together, Mrs Dvořáková. I didn't shout my mouth off, did I? I do hope not. I wouldn't want to give the impression... well, you know what I mean. All right, then, I'll believe you. I don't have much choice, do I?

Do you mind if I call you Vlasta? I'm not very keen on surnames. Cheers, then, Vlasta! You should have the steak tartare. No, I won't – I'm as fat as a bacon pig as it is! I have to go into our bathroom sideways on, especially now I've got Jára's pictures propped up all over the place... I've been wanting to give him a small exhibition this spring. Well, if you insist, I'll have one piece of fried bread. It's donkey's years since I last had fried bread.

Am I on a diet? Heaven forbid, no! I know I could do with losing a few pounds, but at my age you need a bit of ballast. As my father used to say, 'By the time the fat get thin, the thin will be cold.' I had a hatred of fatty food, you see. As a child, I'd push it around my plate because I didn't like the taste of it. 'Too much fat for you? Then cut it thinner!' Dad's words again.

He was a constant source of wise words. He was like a recording. 'Bend the willow while it's young,' he would say. 'No pain, no gain.' I'm sure you've heard that one before. Then there was, 'Spare the rod, spoil the child.' Not that Dad would ever hit me. He never raised his hand to me. But he sometimes gave my brother Karel a belting. I was completely allergic to those proverbs of his. 'A staff is quickly found to beat a dog.' 'All good things come to those who wait.' It was worst when he was talking about Tonda. 'Look at Tonda and what he's achieved! Because he's followed the golden rule!'

Tonda was an older cousin of mine who'd trained as a jeweller in Turnov, then come to Prague and made himself into a goldsmith. Dad loved Tonda and was forever holding him up to us as an example, with the result that I avoided the golden rule like the plague my whole life long. There must be a connection between this and my resistance to being officially married. Because every mention of Tonda was followed by a comment like: 'Make sure you marry well, Alena.'

Anyway, I presented Jára to Dad. You should have seen his expression. He didn't much care for Jára's creations, that's for sure. He had no idea what it meant to be an artist, and poor besides. Poverty was never part of his plan. But because Dad never left anything to chance, he went to Jára and said, 'Jára, I've been giving this painting of yours some thought. And do you know what? It seems to me that you make your pictures too big.'

Jára respected my father and was always polite with him. But he could never hide his true feelings. He told Dad that he never painted his pictures to fit some scheme. But Dad wouldn't be put off. 'I know that that's how you do things, Jára. But you won't get very far with it. You need to think more in business terms!'

Jára didn't see where business came into it. He couldn't have been less interested in business. But he knew my father too little to appreciate what he had in mind. 'What I think, Jára, is that you need a completely different format. Who do you expect to buy such huge pictures? You know what, I've made a few measurements for you. It seems to me the best

size would be thirty by thirty, forty by thirty at most...' That way, it would be easy to transport and display. And if we kept it in the family, it would be free of charge.

Jára looked like a deer in the headlights, and I knew that Dad wasn't exaggerating, he really would be able to sell Jára's pictures if he made them smaller. More than that, he would tell him exactly what to paint in them!

So what did Jára say? He just repeated that he'd always painted his pictures by how he felt, and that he wouldn't be making any changes. And that was it, done and dusted.

Do you mind if I take another piece of fried bread, Vlasta? Well, if you insist, I'll have a little taste, just a teaspoon's worth. Under the commies, we hardly ever got to eat steak tartare. There wasn't much good beef around, and people used to say that what there was, was poisoned.

So you're interested in whether I followed the golden rule? You can be sure that my dad kept me on his chosen path, that's just the way he was. Hardly was I out of primary school than he was handing the bracelets around. Bracelets? Gold ones, of course! The bracelets he bribed the headmistress and the Czech teacher with got me a place at the secondary school of economics for public food services. Both these ladies made out that everything was as it should be. But if it had been, I'd have ended up at some crappy training school. Not because of my marks, because of my cadre record. Which the school took every opportunity to remind me of.

When did I find all this out? Very late, when I was about eighteen. After I got my diploma. Dad knew I'd have made a scene. Yes, I'd have chosen a crappy training school over the bracelets. As no doubt you know yourself, young people have a terrible sense of justice. To this day, I can't stand any kind of palm-greasing. I must say that I managed to keep those chancers at arm's length even during Normalization. And in those days, everyone was giving backhanders. Did I mention that I used to be an art editor for a publisher's? I was forever being approached by artists looking for work. 'Sign me up for that book and you'll get something in return, okay?' they'd insist. 'Don't tell me you've never heard of the ten-per-cent? Come on, Alena! Everyone's doing it?'

Well I never did. If I had, I wouldn't have been able to live with myself.

What were we talking about? That's right, the diploma. Well, I didn't much enjoy school. What good is a matriculation diploma if you don't get taken in at least once in your life? Although I graduated with distinction, I was far more interested in my placement. I don't suppose you know how that worked. Well, at the National Committee office, they looked at your 'materials' and who you knew before choosing a job for you. And as old Doležalová was still the concierge of our building and I was still the daughter of an enemy of the people, I was summoned to the Municipal House, where they sent me to the second floor. I knocked on the door and a voice shouted from inside: 'What do you want?'

Having stepped inside, I realized the voice belonged to a woman with bottle-blond hair who was rummaging in some papers. In place of a greeting, she barked at me: 'Name!'

She just went on rummaging. She didn't even look up. When she addressed me at last, it was as 'Comrade'. Yes, she'd read my materials. She could scarcely imagine what they were going to do with me.

That's right, this woman was a cadre leader. In those days, it was normal for office staff to speak down to you and call you 'Comrade', whether you were an old lady or a child. I explained that I'd passed out of school with distinction, giving me the right to a better

placement and an extra hundred crowns in my monthly pay packet. How much did that make? Something like eight hundred and forty crowns.

The cadre leader looked at me as though I was expecting her to provide that hundred crowns out of her own pocket. 'But you can't expect to start at the top, Comrade! Distinction or no distinction. You have to make your way in a proper worker's profession first!' She proceeded to question me on the work forces I'd been in, and I had to admit that I hadn't been in any. I saw her write in ballpoint in one of her papers: 'Work force: ziro experients.'

That's exactly what she wrote, I swear it. I kept quiet, of course – you can't tell a cadre leader how to spell. I tried to keep my tone and bearing neutral. Which probably didn't go down too well, because the bottle-blonde squawked at me: 'Whatta you staring at?' Then she shoed me out, telling me that someone called Pepík would show me my new workplace.

This Pepík was waiting by the door. He was as green as a pistachio nut. That harpy had probably made his life a misery, too. Anyway, Pepík led me down lots of stairs – from second floor to first, first to ground, ground to basement, all the way down to the cellars. When Pepík opened the door, my heart stopped. We were on the threshold of a huge, dark room. There was crackling and hissing, and steam rising to the low ceiling. Lots of people were milling around, young and old, fat and thin. The ones I couldn't take my eyes off were women poking around in great troughs. They were making potato salad, poking around in it with their bare hands. When I saw the fingers caked with mayonnaise, the mash of potato, egg and salami stuck behind the painted nails...

Pepík pointed at one of those women and then at me, and I couldn't fail to understand that from that day on, I was to be one of the salad girls. And I would keep raking around in the mayonnaise slurry until the bottle-blonde on the second floor decided I'd made a proper connection with the working class. The heat was getting more and more unbearable. A bead of sweat ran down my nose. There wasn't a single window in the whole room, I noticed.

Pepík nodded to a guy in a white cap, who lifted a pan from the range in a weird kind of greeting. This was the chef, and he was in charge of the flock of salad girls. Guess what this guy did next? He leaned over the pan, smacked his lips and gobbled right into it! As the fat spat back at him, my new boss announced: 'There! Now it's good and hot!'

At that moment, I knew I had to get out of there, cadre leader or no cadre leader. Of course I was scared! You can imagine what the commies thought about someone not going to work. Stay at home for over six weeks and by law you were sponging off the socialist system and could be sent to prison.

How did I avoid becoming a sponger? Well, I went to work at a snack counter at the Lucerna palace, selling soup and sausages. And sometimes I'd fill in for the guy on the counter next to mine, serving sauce and dumplings for three crowns a throw and four-fifty if you had the meat with it. Interestingly, lots of folk took just the sauce and dumplings. I lasted a month there before my parents got me something better. Though it depends what you mean by better. I became a bookkeeper at Cartography and Geodetics, working on inventories where the figures didn't add up.

Didn't add up by how much, you ask? Say a hundred thousand. But at least that was easy to put right, because you saw it straight away. When the discrepancy was twenty-three hellers or something, it was much worse. A bookkeeper has to account for every copper. I'd worry about that kind of thing today, but back then my colleague Míla and I couldn't have cared less. We were girls out for a good time in a deadly serious job. We spent most of our working

hours looking for mistakes we'd put in there ourselves, and try as we might, we just couldn't get to the bottom of them.

They do really great fried bread here, don't they? Not too much oil, just how I like it. Anyway, I've read them at last. Read what, you ask? Jára's memoirs, of course. Only this month, actually – a couple of weeks back.

What are you up to next Tuesday? I'm going to see a friend at her studio. And I was thinking, being as you're interested in our generation, you might like to go with me... It's just the other side of Smíchov. Oh, I'd let her know you were coming. She's an odd fish, is Marie. So, see you at the buzzer on Lidická Street?