

# *Father from Birth* by Miroslav Pech

*Translated by Melvyn Clarke*

## TOUCHDOWN

Six in the morning  
Seven below zero  
Warehouse open

Another in a series  
Of amazing  
Life challenges  
has been met

Today I saw a photo of you for the first time ever. You're nine weeks old and look like the arrow cursor that I click in online bookstores to put books into my shopping basket, but mum doesn't think so. She says you're a little fish.

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Today your auntie came on a visit. We had spaghetti. After supper me and auntie went off for a smoke. We chatted about the Job Centre, cos we're both on the dole. On Monday I'm to start a new job. I recently finished at one place where I'd lasted three days. Well, I had my reasons. When me and auntie finished smoking we went back to see mum and to choose you a name. Nothing simple. One day you're going to have to live with your name, so it's important to choose the best one possible, as some names are awkward and won't necessarily do you any good. I like the name Rút for a girl, but it didn't pass muster with mum. She may well have other plans. If you're gonna be a boy then Miloš, Saša and Bohdan are under consideration... I'm joking. The fact is, I don't like any of these boy's names, but mum has circled a couple of them on the quiet. Still, if you're going to be a boy then you're definitely not going to be called after me. Nor are you going to inherit one of your grandfathers' names. Me and your mum have decided that those names are awkward.

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Today I read on a website for mothers-to-be that your mum's womb is gonna be as big as an orange in a week's time. That's good news, don't you think? This made me think back to the shopping I did yesterday. Oranges were actually one of the items on my shopping list. This woman was standing in front of me and complaining that the oranges were awfully soft and bruised, while she herself was squeezing them, which is why they were bruised. The customers squeeze the oranges to see if they're bruised. I only say this cos you might one day find yourself in a similar situation and it may confuse you, an observation like that. I bought some hermelín cheese, which was not actually on mum's list. When I got home I found out mum isn't allowed to eat blue cheese while she's pregnant. Remember that. When you're a lad it is very likely that you'll find a woman who you'll get pregnant, and then she'll

send you out shopping. Remember that pregnant women are not allowed to eat blue cheese! If you're a girl and your partner gets you pregnant, your gynecologist will advise you all about cheeses.

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Today mum was feeling irritable. This is due to her expanding womb. As you know, mum often feels bad. More often than I do. She also complains about her body. She has the feeling it's getting dreadfully bloated. She'd rather go running. She even bought new shoes for that purpose, but then she got blisters from them, so that was the end of her running. When mum gets irritable it makes me irritable too.

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Do you ever hear that old man who lives in the flat next door? I saw him once. I think he's going to die soon. I'm sure we'll live to see him dead. When he sometimes coughs in the evening, me and your mum have a laugh. Not because we wish him any harm, but simply because we find his coughing funny. That's how it is. Things we shouldn't laugh at do actually make us laugh. I'll give you an example. I recently saw a photo on Facebook of a young boy with Down Syndrome. That's a disorder that occurs among new-born babies and stays with the affected person for the rest of their life. You can tell people like that straight away. They've got a round face, expressionless features, flattened faces, slanting eyes, short hands and legs, and they're quite podgy and mentally retarded. So there was this boy with Down syndrome in this photo. He was looking into the lens and smiling. Somebody out of shot was touching his forehead with their index finger. Under the picture was the English caption TOUCHDOWN, which is a sports term for a method of scoring in American football or rugby, for instance. In the context of this photo the word took on a double meaning, which made me laugh, but then there are people who would not appreciate that kind of reaction.

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Today I started my new job. It begins at six in the morning. When I introduced myself to my workmates, one of them said: Welcome to hell. All eight hours I'm doing nothing but dragging, loading, conveying, picking, unloading and so on. I haven't done manual work for quite a long time, so now my hands are aching. There's lots of women there. I could feel their gazes on me. My female workmates are quite worn out from work and mostly a lot older than I am. First, one of them came over to ask me my name. After about fifteen minutes another one appeared. She wanted to know how old I am. When I told her I'm twenty-nine, she thought I was having her on. The third one asked if I'm married. I said I was. And what about children? Not yet, but give it time and definitely. She mentioned her daughter and that she's as old as I am. Then she has another two school-age boys. She smiled. Not many teeth, but very strong fingers. Much stronger than mine. She confided that when she started here she'd been unemployed for two years. It was all so hard that on the first day she felt her hands would drop off. But then she got used to it. She has to commute almost thirty kilometres to work. She gets up at four in the morning. But she has got used to that too. She says you can get used to anything if you have no choice.

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Today we found out that you're no longer an arrow cursor. Or even a little fish. Now you have arms and legs. Your nails are growing, as is your fine hair, and your brain is rapidly developing. Unfortunately you are also starting to perceive pain.

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Today I'm awfully tired again. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, as Jack Torrance was once inspired to say. On the bus this bloke with thin greasy hair sat down next to me. He had a moustache under his nose. All the way he kept making these comments to people standing at the bus stops, who couldn't actually hear him. Don't stare, he said. Oh, do stop staring. He gave a long sniff and stamped his foot. His attention was then attracted by a large dog that was travelling with us. He looked at this dog and winked at it, while it kept avoiding his stare. Looked a bit like Lemmy out of Motörhead. The bloke that is, not the dog. Lemmy out of Motörhead recently died of cancer. He was seventy. He loved alcohol and cigarettes, which is all part of the job description for a bloke like Lemmy, but getting back, we got off at the same bus stop and this bloke walked in front of me down all the same streets. We had the same route home. I started to worry that I'd follow him all the way to our sofa, but eventually he turned off into the gardening shop. Then I kept thinking about this bloke at home. But only for a while. After all, he wasn't all that interesting.

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Today me and mum listened to Starman by David Bowie again. Aren't you just sick and tired of it? David Bowie died recently. He was sixty-nine years old and he had cancer of the lungs. Perhaps I'm going to die of cancer of the lungs sometime too, as I'm addicted to cigarettes. Day after day your mum tells me off over this. She says I stink of fags. It isn't so long ago that she used to puff away like a factory, but she stopped when she found she was pregnant. But I don't intend to stop, as I love cigarettes. Even if they are gradually killing me. You might be a smoker too one day. Actually, that would be quite a boon. If I ran out of cigarettes, I could go round to you for one.

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I handed in my notice at work today. I admit it was too much like hard graft for me. I managed to drag those extremely heavy pallets around for exactly nine days. I gave in my notice, cleared out my locker and left. For a while I walked around town. I felt like buying myself something—treating myself to something nice, something to make me happy. Except that everything that appealed to me in any way cost a load of money. It did occur to me that I should buy something for mum rather than for myself. But that would have been even more expensive. I had about enough in my wallet for two twenty-minute tickets on public transport. In the evening we watched a film. Mum felt ill. She said she was going to sleep, rather than putting up with that. She turned over onto her other side and fell asleep with difficulty. I turned the film off and had a read of some cannibal gore horror in Off Season. Suddenly I heard a cry from somewhere on the block. Domestic violence was the first thing that occurred to me, but then the cries took on a rhythm, and I realized what was actually going on. On top of that the old man started to sneeze noisily. Fortunately it was all soon over and I could carry on reading undisturbed.

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Today I saw your second photo. You're forty-seven millimetres in length, and your head and little body can clearly be made out in the picture. I showed mum where your arms and legs were, but mum wasn't entirely sure about that. We also now know when you are due. Mum is now in her thirteenth week. She's starting the fourth lunar month of her pregnancy, which means it's now starting to be visible. She's bought some special trousers that she feels much better in and her belly's freer in. It's not so confined now, and that's the point. Otherwise mummy is getting more and more worried about her belly. On the internet she was looking at the bellies of women in their thirteenth week. Their bellies struck her as being much smaller. "According to this here I'm more like in my fifth," she sighed. "At least you see how much you're ahead compared with them," I said. Apparently you're now able to make a fist and move your lips. And more importantly, the risk of a miscarriage has gone down to sixty-five percent. If everything carries on the way it

should then you'll be out in half a year.

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Today I found out you're only now growing auricles. How many times have I wondered if you might be hearing what me and mum are saying? I wondered this without it ever occurring to me that you didn't actually have ears yet. In the afternoon I needed to take out some money. I checked how much I had left on my account and despite the frost that's lain round about these last few days I was sweating. My money from the Employment Exchange hadn't yet arrived. I clenched my fists as I left, only to realize as I did so, that I was doing something you can now do too."

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Today mum told me she'd met the old man from next door. Apparently he was standing in the doorway.

"Standing in the doorway?" I asked in surprise. "But he's in a wheelchair."

"I know, but there he was standing."

I stared at the ground and thought it over.

"And so then," mum interrupted the silence, "suddenly he started to dance the can-can."

"Ha ha ha ha."

"Ho ho ho ho"

We had a laugh.

Then I went to write a poem. I'll tell you something. Over one single month I've written thirty-seven poems. Quite an accomplishment, don't you think? I work like a dog, and yet when I say I write poems, there's always somebody who stares at me as if I do nothing at all. I probably have most experience writing poetry. I've been doing it for years and years. I've even texted lyrics to this heavy metal band. I wrote the words to three songs and got five hundred for them cash in hand. Pity they never recorded them. I've been told by several people that what I write aren't actually poems. Whatever. I think that even the text on a chocolate wafer is a poem.

Warnings on cigarette packets are poems.

Temporary employment contracts are poems.

The incomprehensible captions on your ultrasound photo are poems...

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Today I started a new job. Actually, it isn't entirely new. A few months ago I handed in my notice after working there for a year, telling them I'd find something better. The days passed and I didn't find anything. And it wasn't just because of the money that I left. The relations there were tense. I was just not into putting up with it any more. When I left I was genuinely happy. Never again, I told myself. And here I am again. As if I'd just been away for the weekend. Nothing's changed. Just a couple of new faces. Otherwise absolutely nothing at all.

One time I had to stop the jitney, release the loaded fork and start taking some deep breaths. Then it hit me. My once and future workmates' spiteful looks and lips clamped sternly shut, as they tried to make it plain I wasn't welcome. At the end of the shift Vitold stopped by. Vitold is a hirsute thirty-seven-year-old with marked hysterical tendencies. He likes making things up and raving about things. He says he was once a talented juggler. He used to go around the festivals and all kinds of events where the spectators would admire his unique art. He even had plans to set up a school for jugglers. But then his girlfriend, who was also by coincidence a juggler, left him. She joined the circus and went off to France to juggle. Nothing remained for the abandoned and forlorn juggler but to get into his forklift truck and spend the rest of his life there.

He let me have it: "You're a pillock for coming back."

"Things just didn't work out for me," I said.

Then he mentioned Headcase, who I've had more than one run-in with.

"He was ranting that he's going to do you in," he grimaced.

"Nothing's happened yet," I retorted.

In the evening mum was complaining of stomach cramps. I asked her if she had told the doctor. She shook her head. I said he probably ought to know about it. She shook her head again. Apparently it's a common thing. Around midnight I was still up, and I just couldn't drop off. I feel a migraine coming on. Back soon.

(...)

Freedom just doesn't come into it.

Enter the word LOVE

on the keyboard

Press DELETE

LOVE disappears

It was so nice outside today that I didn't want to go out. So I didn't.

I spent all eight hours at work moving pallets around. That's how I make a living, as you know. That's how I make money. I drive a forklift truck or a jitney. I'm a jitney or forklift truck driver. It's not a bad job. I've tried lots of jobs and this one grabs me most, I think. I can sit and drive around all day. There's something almost zen about it, using my arms and legs as I leave my brain in peace. My work gets done almost automatically.

El Santo – a twenty-seven-year-old hip-hop fan who dreams of one day showing the world his talent and becoming a famous rapper – upturned his forklift truck. He turned too sharply. The battery leaked acid, so it's a write-off. Bumble took a picture of the upturned truck and showed it everybody. The boss was really wild.

"Are you hurt?" she asked El Santo.

"Nothing serious," he smiled, "just a slightly bruised backside."

"I'd like to give it a good kicking more than anything else!"

Vitold was also quite beside himself.

"That junkie's going to kill somebody here one day!"

The others were of the same opinion.

"Why don't they do some tests on him for drugs?"

The truck drivers are forever wondering why this boss keeps him on. After all, he's just one cock-up after another. He drops his crates, he comes into work when he wants, he's always getting a bollocking, and now on top of that he's tipped his truck over.

The boss defends El Santo with a spark in her eye, saying he's a competent driver. But Headcase and Vitold see it differently.

"She's in some racket with his uncle," Vitold says.

"He's definitely got something on her," Headcase adds.

And so on.

It is a good job. But doing nothing is better.

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Today I had a message in my mail from the anarchists. They're organizing a regular meeting at the station next week. The mail mentions the fact that I haven't turned up there for a long time. What's up with me? Am I okay? They also pointed out that I haven't paid my membership fees to the Anarchist Club. Of course, I'm allowed to pay this year's any time this year. But then what about last year's and the year before last's? I wrote back that I'm no longer an anarchist, but a future parent.

The other message had an invoice from Starnet. No writing back needed there.

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Today we almost knocked down a roe deer. Mum was driving the car. I'm rather ashamed about this. I used to drive too, but then mum said she was scared, so she took over the steering wheel. The problem is that she isn't driving at her best, what with her belly. On the way we had to stop in lay-bys twice. One time because of stomach pains and then because of the deer. We were driving at about ninety kilometres an hour when it ran across right past the bumper, missing us by a whisker, quite literally. If we'd bumped into it, both the deer and the car would have been squashed. Along with ourselves perhaps. The car would probably have skidded and crashed into a van on the other side. When the deer ran past our bumper I covered my eyes with my hands. This might not have been a heroic gesture, but what was I to do? People look at me strange when they hear that mum's driving a car in her seventh month and exposing herself to risks, while I lounge around in the passenger seat. But the truth is I'm afraid. I haven't driven for a long time and I'm afraid of starting again. I'm afraid of dying on the road. I'm afraid of the road and cars. Does that make me worth any less? Do I have the right to still call myself a man after an admission like that?

We had to stop in a lay-by, because mum was trembling. In a situation like that I really should have sat behind the wheel and driven the rest of the way, but I didn't. Instead I got out and lit a cigarette. I was thinking of the deer. It very nearly got killed. Just like we did.

Once we drove into a ditch. Just after we'd bought the car. At the time mum was still smoking. She was about to throw a fag end from the window, lost her hold on the driving wheel and we ended up in the ditch, grinding the soil at a sixty degree angle. For about twenty metres. We missed the trees and bushes. The car was out of control, but stopped of its own accord. We had to wait for somebody to drive by. The first driver sped past, but the second one stopped. He took me to a nearby cowshed, where I asked the co-op farm workers for help. They dragged us out with their tractor. A co-op mechanic checked to see if the car was alright. In the cowshed he tightened a loose wheel and his workmate washed the car down with a hose. We thanked them for their help and were just about to get in the car when one of them noticed that mum was still a bit upset.

"You going to let her drive in that state then, eh?" he asked, though actually it didn't sound like a question at all. The guys looked at me. All I could think of to say was that I didn't have a driving licence. I couldn't very well admit that I was afraid to drive. The very fact I didn't



have a driving licence brought me down in their eyes to the level of a dung beetle. If I'd mentioned my fear as well then they'd have seen me as what a dung beetle rolls in front of him. Sometimes I find life is seriously difficult. Sometimes it's my own doing, but most times I have the feeling that society is basically asking too much of me. I don't understand why I should do things I don't want to do. I'm not allowed to show fear, apprehension or weakness. Anything like that is socially unacceptable. A man is not allowed to show anything like that. Soon I'll be thirty. John Lennon once proclaimed: Don't trust anybody over thirty. He died when he was forty, murdered by a fan, who had perhaps lost trust in him.

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Today I wanted to do something. Something to relieve the day of its averageness. But I couldn't think of anything. I wrote five poems and then deleted them straight away. Then I sat in an armchair and thought back. It occurred to me that I would never write them again. I wondered if this was a good or bad thing. The poems struck me as awful, so I'd deleted them. But then how much worse were they than the ones before? For the rest of the day I regretted my decision. Just to take my mind off things somehow I played Free Bird. When the song had finished, I tried to write them again. All five poems. I didn't delete those ones, even though they didn't even come up to the standard of the ones I had deleted.

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More gloom today. Was it reasonable of me? Well, am I able to bring up a child? After all, I always wanted to be single, which means childless. I have always believed, and I assure you that I still believe that a child takes away your freedom. I was always of the opinion that I'm too selfish to be a father. How are we going to put up with each other? I'm going to have you round my neck for so many years. I'm not going to be able to let you out of my sight for so many years. You know I could even go to jail? For instance, if I'm not watching over you, and you run out into the road and get knocked down by a car. Like that deer. Society casts all the blame and responsibility on me. Nobody will be taken aback that it was a car that killed you. No one will say: Here, these cars have killed so many people... how about banning them? No way is that ever going to happen. They'd rather lock me up. They'd rather ruin my life than give up cars. They'd rather say: You hear that? Bastard. He puts the blame on the poor car rather than accepting responsibility himself!

My eyes are smarting. I feel like sleeping, but cannot for the life of me get to sleep. A vague memory from childhood keeps disturbing me. I'm standing between two cars. One of them moves and slowly reverses towards me. If it hadn't been for my dad I would have ended up squashed under the rear wheel. Dad grabbed my hand, pulled me away and shouted at the thoughtless driver, who just ignored him. He didn't understand him, because he was Austrian and we were Czech tourists. Dad swore at him in Czech, because he nearly ran me over. But all the blame would have been on dad. He should have kept watch on me. He did know after all that the town was full of cars.

Parenthood is a full-time job.

Freedom just doesn't come into it.

I don't blame you at all.

It's my fault.

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Today, as on all previous days, we got up with the cats. Dorka usually lets us know she's there by starting to bite our fingers. She's forever hungry. Maybe my fingers remind her of sausages. Other times they start running after us. That often happens. Sometimes they even run around in the middle of the night. When I'm on a morning shift they get up with me and wait until I pour them some dried cat food, which they quickly gobble up. Then they sit down by the door. Once I've stroked them as I'm leaving, they go and lie down again. I've written a

couple of poems about them. And about you too. We often observe mum's belly, bubbling away like goulash.

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Today mum's unbalanced friend came round. They sat in the kitchen and chatted. Her friend has a problem, so mum offered to help her find a psychiatrist. I was hoping to do some writing, but I couldn't concentrate because of their constant chattering. I decided to do what I have long planned to do. Recently I was going through my modest library and took out around thirty books. Mostly stale postmodernism that's long past it. I stuffed them all into my knapsack and got on my bike. The second-hand bookshop owner was happy. Apparently he had not reaped such a fine harvest in a long time. He bought half the books I offered and gave me four hundred and seventy crowns. I took the others to another second-hand bookshop. The lady didn't look impressed. She pointed at two books.

"I'll give you twenty."

"Okay. What about the others?"

She shook her head.

"Not even for free?"

"Well..."

"So keep them then. What am I going to do with them?"

I spent the money in a bookshop. The old replace the new. The girls were still looking for a psychiatrist. I had to go to work. There was a racket there, like there is every Monday. In the evening I'd had it up to here.

I got home around a quarter past ten. It was a warm evening, so I travelled in my T-shirt. I hit the bread and Lipánek cheese. The girls had found a psychiatrist.

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Vissarionovich came and sat down next to me today. It was just five minutes before the end of the shift. I was sitting on a bench, waiting until I could go home.

"Niggers."

I looked round in surprise. Vissarionovich was standing at the gate. He was standing like a statue and staring fixedly at the barbed-wire fence. I hadn't noticed any black people.

Perhaps he was thinking of that Moroccan who does the cleaning here, but not even he was to be seen. It's true that lots of gypsies work at disbursement and A-bay XXX, but there aren't any here.

He lit a fag and sat down.

"When I say nigger in front of our mutt, it can make him go crazy. I've trained him that way."

I asked Vissarionovich what kind of dog he had.

"A Staffordshire bull terrier."

"Uhuh."

"My old doll wanted a cat. No way! I had a look at the dogs' homes webpage and found him there. I took him in on probation. He was with us for a week. He didn't hurt the wife or kids, so he stayed. I started training him. He obeys my every word. And you know what I told my old doll?"

"What?"

"I said *now* get yourself a cat."

He was hugely amused by his own joke. I smiled too, just to be safe.

"I couldn't have a dog like that."

"Why not?"

"A dog like that needs authority."

"That's true," he admitted.

"I probably wouldn't have the time for it. It does need a lot of work. You always have to go running around somewhere with it, don't you? It has to be trained. It has to obey you. Hmm, it's no joke having a dog like that..."



So I chattered on like that, even though I've vowed in the past not to talk to Nazis. Vissarionovich is a skilled shoemaker from Ukraine. A year and a half ago he had a serious industrial injury. A half-ton transom fell on his foot. He was off sick for some time, and when he came back to work he started having problems with his back. He applied for a disability pension, but the doctor said no way. Fifty percent of his body works, so what does he want a disability pension for?

After work I went to the Co-op bakery section. I was wondering whether to get bread or rolls. Opposite me stood a woman in a straw hat. She was fumbling around too.

"It's all as hard as rock," she said angrily. "Hit someone on the head with that and you'll kill them. Like grenades, they are!"

Mum wanted a melon, but alas they didn't have any. I bought cat litter and eight grenades. In the evening I received a lecture on cloth nappies. Mum showed me how to fold and use them.

"I'll never manage that," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm a clot."

I have found out that cloth nappies are less expensive and more environmentally-friendly.

Lots of mothers use cloth. It's not a good thing for children to come into contact with chemicals as soon as they are born. And classic Pampers are made of chemicals.

"But they're going to come into contact with chemicals sooner or later anyway."

"That's true," mum agreed.

"And we're going to have to keep washing the cloth ones."

"But then they don't produce so much waste.

"And what are waste tips for?"

"Well, exactly!"

Eventually she tried to set my mind at rest. Lots of mothers find that cloth is a challenge, as it soaks up an ocean of time, so they go over to normal nappies within a couple of weeks anyway. We might end up that way too, but why not try them? She showed me other kinds of cloth nappies and an instruction video on how to change them. After about an hour I said I was going to bed.

"Well, I'm not sure we've actually covered everything."

Clearly, I am not going to be the one making the decisions about the nappies.

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Today I was talking to Kúča. He called me just as I was balancing a pallet on my fork at an eight-metre height. The fork swayed this way and that. The pallet weighed about half a ton and every time it swung forward, its weight raised the rear of the truck.

"Hi Kúča."

"Hi, so how's things?"

"Fine. How about you?"

"I spent the night writing."

"Good man, then."

I knocked my pallet against a rack beam, which shook all over.

"Let's see if you can guess how many words."

"Here... Kúča... I'm just..."

"Have a guess."

"Okay... how about... four thousand?"

"More."

"Six then?"

"Oh, no way!"

"Eleven?"

"Thirteen thousand four hundred and fifty-two."

"Fantastic!"

"Come round sometime. We can have a chat."

"Okay."

"I set down the pallet and brought the fork back down to the ground. As I was driving out from the aisle, dozy Kličko almost did for me, as he came hurtling across the warehouse at full speed. Missed me by a whisker. In the office they were working out average wages.

"It comes to twenty-six thousand odd," said Headcase.

"Hmm, who gets that?" Pontský asked angrily. "I definitely don't."

"I get barely half that," said Vitold.

"They're holding us on a short leash so we can't jump around much," Pontský continued, "they've got it all worked out. They just give you enough for food and petrol, and that's it."

It's not bad work, but there could be more money in it. A short way off from this group stood Floyd Cobretti, silently puffing away on an electronic cigarette.

"Here, mate, this is brilliant," he started up when he saw me. "You ought to try it."

"I'll probably stick to normal cigarettes."

"Ugh," he spat. "Tar, yuk."

"You did use to smoke it all your life."

"Disgusting."

"You know what I read recently online?" Floyd shook his head. "E-cigarette smokers get oil marks on the brain."

"Rubbish."

"Apparently it's true."

The chemist cut me down to size: "Not only do they not give you oil marks and they do not block up your arteries with tar, but what's more, smoking e-cigarettes is healthy, because they only contain nicotine, and nicotine stimulates brain activity. And above all," he said, waving his e-cig under my nose triumphantly, "using it will help you to gradually get over your addiction."

"Oh come on, you smoke more now than you ever did."

"Not true!"

Floyd puffed out and his face disappeared behind a dense cloud of smoke with a strong aroma of strawberries and vanilla. Floyd Cobretti has a fridge crammed full of vape refills. He vapes all the flavours you can think of: coffee, coca cola, forest fruits, Cuban cigars, peach, Red Bull, apple, caramel, menthol, tobacco, mint, cherry, bilberry, watermelon, banana, coconut, green tea... basically everything. Floyd Cobretti combines flavours too. These are mostly blends given to him by his girlfriend, who also vapes. She always makes a blend of whatever she doesn't like.

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Today Kefír came on a visit. I grew up with him in our hometown. He's got a four-year-old son, and he wanted to know when you're due.

"In two months."

"Are you looking forward?"

"Sure."

I told him about the cloth.

"What's that?"

"Nappies."

"Aha."

"That's what our parents wrapped us in," I explained, awkwardly parrotting everything I'd learnt from mum.

"And is that what you want then?"

"Mums are going mad over them these days, yeah."

Bruno jumped up on the table and stared into Kefír's eyes.

"He's got fine teeth." Kefír pointed at Bruno's excessively well-developed canines.

"Right, give him wings and he sure makes a good bat."

We went out onto the balcony for a smoke.

"You gonna be there for the birth?"

"Dunno."

"You have to," said Kefir.

"I want to, like. But I dunno... I'm afraid I might be sick. If only it didn't take so long. Your birth took you guys about an hour, didn't it?"

"Ten."

"I'll never manage that."

Kefir tried to put my mind at rest, but I wasn't listening very much:

"What pisses me off most is that my first hasn't even been born yet and people are already saying: Ah, just wait till you have your second... You know? As if it was something inevitable. And yet nobody asks if you actually want a second one. You're just basically gonna have one and there you go."

"I don't want a second one any more," said Kefir. "Don't have the money. One's not enough; two's too many."

I asked him about what was new back in our hometown.

"Nothing's happened there... except..."

He looked like he was thinking, though you can never tell with Kefir.

"Marek killed himself. You know?"

"Which one?"

"The mad one."

"Suicide?"

"Pills."

"Suicide then?"

"No one knows."

I try to remember when I last saw Marek. About a year ago? Hmm. About one in the morning at the 24-7 place. I almost didn't recognize him. He'd put on an awful lot of weight. Perhaps it was the pills that did it. He once told me he had seven personalities. He could hear seven different voices that alternately threatened him, swore at him and ordered him about. Some spoke gently while others seemed to speak to him from the grave. I was sitting at the 24-7 cafe with Kefir, who noticed that I was staring at Marek. He warned me to stop or Marek'd do me. I got up and went over to him. I felt I had nothing to lose. Marek looked at me and smiled.

"How's it going?" I asked and immediately regretted it. His face was swollen and his unhealthily pale skin was covered in red spots. Two deep wrinkles stretched out around his mouth. I realized he'd aged an awful lot. You don't notice ageing in somebody you see every day. It's only years of separation that do that...

He responded to my question with a shrug and a slight smile, as he observed his half-finished cup of tea and said nothing. I stood over him a while longer and then went back to my seat. That was our last meeting...

"Have you got a television?" Kefir asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"We don't want one."

"Television is important."

"Why?"

He looked like he was thinking, though you can never tell with Kefir.

Floyd Cobretti built himself a Great Pyramid of Giza out of cardboard and Scotch tape at home. He uses it to store his water carboys. You have never tasted such good water. It's totally something else. And healthy. You ought to try it too."

He was chewing on a sausage from a polythene bag, which he was just about to throw into the bin.

"Hold on," I said, holding him back.

"What?"

"Gimme that bag."

He hesitated.

"What for?"

"For the droppings."

"Droppings?"

"I put the cat droppings in them."

There wasn't much to do at work in the afternoon, so they sent me home at six. During the night I was woken up by wailing. Mum had got cramp in her leg. She sat up in bed and clenched the duvet.

"What should I do?" I asked.

"I don't know."

Mum carried on groaning while I went back to sleep.