

## ***The Rift* by Jozef Karika**

### Summary

Igor, an unemployed university graduate, discovers the testimonies of Walter Fischer, a psychiatric patient. Fischer had disappeared mysteriously in the Tribeč Mountains seventy years ago. When he equally mysteriously reappeared two months later, his body was covered with strange burns and injuries. He was disoriented and couldn't explain what had happened to him. He never recovered. Igor continues his investigation and, to his astonishment, finds that Fischer's case was not at all isolated. The first mentions of mysterious disappearances in these mountains date back to a distant past. The number of spine-chilling cases increases. Igor, his girlfriend Mia, the conspiracy theorist Andrej, and the hard-core sceptic David begin to dig deeper into the mystery and unearth a truth which is much more terrifying than any fantasy. They embark on an expedition into the forests of the Tribeč Mountains, where they experience something that defies human understanding. Their initially innocent quest ends in tragedy. The mystery, as they find out, has incredibly sharp teeth...

### Story background

This book came about in a strange way – a certain man approached the author and told him a horrifying real-life story. Jozef Karika put everything down, verified many of his assertions, added his own findings and put all of it into a book that you are holding in your hands. On its pages unwinds a very mysterious, tragic and terrifying case. At the same time the book reveals one of the greatest Slovak mysteries – the inexplicable disappearance of people in the Tribeč Mountains.

A mere legend, willful mystification or a horrifying reality? Retelling an engrossing horror tale, the author asks this question, but leaves the reader to find the answer himself.

## Promo information

This novel was nominated for the Anasoft Litera prize, which is Slovakia's most prestigious literary award. It won the Readers' Choice Award.

It also got the Platinum Book Award – having sold 40,000 hardcover copies.

Rights to its publication have been sold in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland.

The Slovak company DNA Production is filming an epic movie based on this novel.

This is being directed by Peter Bebjak, a winner of the Best Director Award from the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival and other international film awards.

Excerpt:

## Author's foreword

*This is not for you. I still remember the sentence. Igor looked at me and said, raising his eyebrows: "This is not for you."*

*The tone he'd said it in caught my attention. Until then I had been sure that the whole thing was only a joke – or that I was dealing with a fool or a desperate man who wants to be interesting at all costs.*

*However, when he said, "This is not for you," I had doubts for the first time. I'm not saying I changed my mind. Frankly, even now – over a year since we met – I don't know if he was telling the truth or making things up. Or what the ratio was of reality to fantasy. Some elements of his story are undoubtedly true – I've verified them thoroughly. However, others... Well, you'll see for yourself.*

*By way of introduction, I would like to emphasize one thing: I don't claim that what you are going to read is true. At the same time, I don't claim that it is an intentional lie or the statement of a madman. After all, my opinion doesn't really matter. It'll be best if you form your own opinion about it and decide for yourself if this is made up or a record of what really happened.*

*As an author, I've done my best to record and fictionalize this mind-blowing story. And this is exactly what Igor asked me to do. Just like me, he didn't want to convince anyone, reveal hidden facts, or create a legend.*

*The only thing he wanted was to record the dreadful and tragic events which he survived, and, as he stressed, get the information to people. To quote his words: "So that it wouldn't be all in vain."*

*But let's get back to the beginning.*

*"This is not for you," said Igor, making a disappointed face.*

*I don't know what he had expected of me, but I obviously didn't meet his expectations. Maybe he saw through me and felt that I thought he was a madman or a conman. I had quite a few good reasons to think so.*

*About half a year after I had published my mystery novel Fear, I got a weird e-mail. An unknown man, signed as Igor M., claimed that some scenes in the book were way too similar to what he had experienced himself. I became alert. I sometimes get e-mails like this. Their writers often then accuse me of plagiarism or urge me to admit that I had described their personal experiences.*

*Some people have an odd sense of logic. You probably understand now why I was alert. Besides accusations of plagiarism or the theft of personal experiences, I also faced another problem – the offer of a perfect idea for another book. I get a lot of offers like this (I'll give you a perfect idea for a book, and you'll pay me). It's often tiring to explain that although a good idea is important, it is the least valuable commodity in the process of book writing. I have dozens of my own great ideas, but because of time and work constraints, only fifteen per cent of them, at best, will ever become books.*

*Moreover, these perfect ideas are often offered by people who are convinced that they are in telepathic communication with aliens, that they have revealed a global conspiracy whose roots lie in the village of Teplička nad Váhom, or that they have been waging a heroic fight with the "mafia" town council about the removal of dog excrement.*

*Therefore, I wrote a polite reply to Igor saying that the story of Fear is a product of my imagination and that I'm not currently looking for ideas for a book. I didn't even have time to develop my own ideas – that is, after all, true. I stressed that I was only interested in scary or paranormal subjects only as an artist and story-teller; otherwise, I did not believe them. Rather the opposite. I was sceptical and distrustful of them.*

*However, Igor couldn't be discouraged so easily. He insisted that the scenes from Fear where the protagonists can't find their way in the mountains, experiencing a*

*distorted perception of time and space, were very similar to what he had experienced in real life. He attached a link to a web article and a photograph he had taken. I won't tell you here what was in the article or in the picture – we'll get there soon. For the time being, it is enough to tell you that as soon as I saw the photo and read the article, I sensed a really good story.*

*To tell the truth, my attention was captured by the frightening and bizarre nature of what Igor was suggesting. However, I was still aware of the risk that it could be either a joke or the product of a deranged mind. This seemed way more probable than anything else.*

*Despite that, I let him talk me into meeting him, although I normally don't do things like this. Something inside was telling me to make an exception. I went to Žilina to meet Igor and hear his mind-blowing story.*

*In the following pages, you'll read the best rendition of the story I could produce.*

*After some initial hesitation, I persuaded Igor that although I was doubtful and sceptical, I would give fair treatment to whatever he told me. He didn't ask for more.*

*He didn't try to convince me that what he was telling me was true. He didn't try to stop me from considering him insane. Quite the opposite. He admitted such a possibility. It even seemed that such an explanation would be a relief for him.*

*I don't want to hold you up. I am curious what you'll think of the story, but first, a couple of short notes. I recorded his whole story in six sessions. Igor told me everything in person – once matter-of-factly and quietly, and once very distractedly, emotionally, and confusedly. At all times, there was a voice recorder on the table. Then I fictionalized the many hours of recordings. That is exactly what Igor had wished for. As a result, some passages are direct quotations from the recordings, whereas others have been moderately modified to suit the genre of a novel.*

*However, I never changed any detail of what he said, nor did I intervene in his story.*

*(The only exceptions are the names and surnames of the characters, which have been all changed.) If something in the text required more details, I added an explanatory footnote. My aim was to keep the recordings as authentic as possible, recount the story as Igor had told it to me, and make it a good read.*

*I openly admit that adapting the recordings was mentally exhausting. The story and its telling by a person of flesh and blood struck a chord with me. I can't say that this downright scared me, but it alarmed and at times threw me off balance. While I was*

*transcribing the recordings, I could often hear Igor's words echoing in my ears: "This is not for you." He had read me perfectly already when we first met. Maybe he'd been right.*

Jozef Karika

## **THE FIRST SERIES OF RECORDINGS** **(recorded between 18 April and 16 May 2015)**

I should have turned back and left, leaving the black monster alone. The repulsive damn thing! Sure, hindsight is always twenty-twenty. However, how on earth was I supposed to know what the discovery would lead me to? If only it had been me... A fucking steel door. How could I have known what was behind it?!

I only wanted a bit more cash. I thought I would grab a couple of antiques and flog them in the pawn shop around the corner or in the antique shop on the main square. Who could have suspected I would find... I don't know what to call it. Do you understand?

But first things first. Let's get back to the beginning. We'll get to the steel monster – and to what I found inside it – in a while anyway.

I am a university graduate; my field isn't important. I graduated just three months ago, so clearly I am registered with the employment office. I have to pay the rent. My girlfriend can foot some bills, but she cannot cover all our expenses. We need to eat, get dressed, and everything else, you know. I have some odd jobs, but as you can imagine, I mostly do boring work.

It was the same case this time. An investor had bought an old building on Hurbanova Street and was planning a complete renovation. All the old stuff had to be removed. Who would they call in? University graduates registered with the employment office. Just so that these young people would realize that they hadn't studied in vain. The lady at the office would offer an internship. For three or four months and for an unbelievable one hundred and thirty euros a month. Take it or leave it, who cares.

Yet, if you don't take it, she'll put a black mark against you because you are not cooperative, and next time she'll kick you out in no time. She'll strike you off the register, so you won't swell the unemployment rate. This is social welfare in real life. And so, I also take menial jobs. I must. I slog as a blue-collar worker, hoping somebody will at least reply to my umpteenth job application.

This drives me up the wall. But joking apart, that's where it all started. Of course, I didn't know it then, but the countdown had begun in the derelict building on Hurbanova Street. It was ticking away quietly until the game was over, even for me. Game over, man, just like that (a snap of fingers). If only for me, fuck, if only for me... I also got others in trouble. You know how it all ended, so you understand. But I want to tell you the entire story. Think what you like, consider it trumped up for all I care. Well, that goddamn day. I got up in the morning as usual. Mia was already in the kitchen. Her full name is Miroslava, but I call her Mia. We had started dating when we were in the third year at university, and we've been together ever since. I heard her making breakfast. Cups clanking. She likes making hot cocoa. I could do without all that, but I don't care. When you share a small one-room flat with someone, you mustn't care about trifles. The time-proven wisdom I learned while staying at the university hall of residence was also applicable to my life with Mia. I got up, turned on my laptop, and checked my blog. I quite enjoy blogging, but that's what you already know, I suppose.

Some new comments had been added overnight. I just ran my eyes over them; I didn't feel like entering into a discussion. A dork nicknamed Kochčera had been trolling me as usual. Never feed trolls. I checked the number of views. Not at all bad. My most read article about my experiences travelling on Slovak trains had been viewed over a hundred thousand times; the others had fewer views, but they were still quite popular.

"Good morning." Mia approached me, and I could smell the aroma of cocoa. She laid her hand on my shoulder and clutched her fingers, massaging my neck. I often wake up sore and stiff, so I'll never say no to a good massage. She's good at it. She had attended a massage course. She had also graduated from university, so she has to do all sorts of things to make some extra money. That's what I like about her. When things aren't going well, I start using four-letter words, often getting worked up over nothing. However, she doesn't complain. Instead, she attended a massage course to earn some extra cash. Although I like it, I'm not particularly pleased. When

massaging, she touches all kinds of guys and old people. Nothing pleasant. But let's get back to the point.

"Don't lose yourself reading. You're supposed to be there in forty-five minutes," she reminded me, kissing my hair.

Great. As if I didn't know what was ahead of me that day. I wished I could stay at home. But I had already registered; if I didn't turn up, the employer would report me to the employment office. Besides that, I didn't want Mia to sustain the whole household. I don't feel good about it.

She has never reproached me for anything, but she didn't have to. It is bad enough that she gives massages to unknown guys and old people. I don't want to be a loafer, so I ate my breakfast and went to work.

The morning wasn't much fun. September had just begun; it was quite cold outside. The town was waking up. I met only a few pedestrians. I didn't see much, passing through arcades in the main square, with fog floating in the air. There was an autumn fog which usually disappeared by midday. Maybe the day would clear up. One couldn't know at that time of the day. I could see Renaissance and Baroque buildings emerging from the mist. A fantasy atmosphere. I felt like in *Game of Thrones*.

Passing a shabby-looking church, I turned into the back streets and, walking along the Lower Bank, got to Hurbanova Street. It wasn't far anymore, but my enthusiasm for work was close to zero. I felt my feet growing heavier with each new step. If I'd listened to my body, as Mia often advised me to do, I'd have given up and returned home. A pity, I didn't.

Instead of turning back, I continued walking mindlessly, like an automaton. The former synagogue, a medical college, which looked even shabbier than the church on the main square, turn right and...

"You've arrived at your destination," my GPS would have said if I'd had one.

In the old days there were a lot of buildings, villas, and palaces from the beginning of the twentieth century in this neighbourhood. Some of them had been nicely renovated; others had been torn down, replaced by modern blocks of flats or car parks. However, some buildings had remained in their original condition, unaltered. The villa I was heading towards was one of them. It was located behind the green building of the hall of residence and canteen of a secondary school. It was barely visible from the pavement. I had some doubts for a while if I was in the right place.

I passed through a narrow passage between the hall of residence and an unfinished guesthouse. I saw something unexpected – an Art Nouveau villa, similar to the hall of residence, but smaller. It also probably dated back to the early twentieth century, but unlike the green building by the pavement, it hadn't been renovated. On the contrary, it had been past its prime for a long time. I wondered how come I had never noticed it. I had walked down Hurbanova Street perhaps a thousand times. But unsurprisingly, its front was covered by the hall of residence and its rear, from Andrej Kmet' Street, by a long block of flats. Who knows whether the investor wanted to rebuild this ruin or knock it down and get some lucrative land in the town centre. Frankly, I didn't really care. They could do whatever they liked. I was much more bothered by what I would be doing in the next few days.

Man, it was nothing pleasant. If you ever had a temporary job as a student, you know what I'm talking about. I was expected by a bunch of equally enthusiastic co-workers, one or two dudes who represented the investor, and a hell of a lot of work. Already the first day put me through hell. And we only did preparatory stuff. The villa didn't look spacious from the outside – it had two upper floors, a small decorative spire, and a cracked facade with some reliefs and other bullshit.

The inside was, however, much worse. It smelled of oldness and rot, and there was dust floating everywhere. The autumn fog was dispersing, and a weak sun was peeking in through the dirty windows. I would have preferred it to remain hidden. The sun's rays revealed clouds of floating dust. I could see fluffy clusters rather than particles of dust floating and whirling. Recently I had read an interesting blog post about parasites living in dust. Its text was accompanied by detailed pictures of the microscopic animals. I thought of them whenever the grains of dust irritated my nose or made me choke.

However, this was only the beginning. The two guys sent by the investor instructed us to remove the furniture from the rooms and place it in front of the villa. This was the first time I asked myself what institution had been located in this building in the past. It wasn't a private residence. The way the rooms were laid out and furnished suggested something completely different.

"This used to be a hall of residence," said my co-worker, gasping as we dragged a heavy, squeaky metal bed down a long corridor.

"You think so?" I asked doubtfully.

"A hall of residence, like the building by the road."



It is true that both the ground floor and the upper floors were divided by a central corridor lined by several doors. All of them opened into small rooms equipped with modest furniture and one or two iron beds. Which were fucking heavy.

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head. “It looks more like a hospital or a sanatorium.”

“We’ll fuckin’ get TB,” muttered my co-worker, his face contorted with disgust.

Other great options immediately emerged in my mind. Somewhere I read that, for example, cholera bacteria can survive for dozens of years.

“Or syphilis, it was also quite widespread at that time,” I added to improve the mood.

“But it is not something that you can catch just like that, right?”

“Well... I don’t know,” I said. I enjoyed scaring him. Besides that, it occurred to me that this job could be a source of inspiration for a good blog post. I took out my smartphone and took a picture of the desolate corridor, which had a tall window at its end.

My spirits slightly lifted, but not for long. Another bunch of guys arrived at the villa.

They were wearing professional-looking workwear and carrying some pretty cool gear. Real workers, not university-educated amateurs like us.

This assumption didn’t take long to be confirmed. They started drilling into the walls and the floor in one of the rooms on the ground floor. They were probably looking for waterpipes, riser pipes, and the like. Whatever it was, the result was the same – a hellish racket. The noise of at least two pneumatic drills mixed with the noise of some kind of chisel cutting off pieces of the wall. It was hell. The whole building was quivering. I felt the floor vibrating beneath my feet. Nobody had prepared me for this. Perhaps not even the lady at the employment office had known what this job was about.

Within half an hour the air had become completely unbreathable. Clouds of dust and loud curses rose from the ground floor. There are two types of building professionals – those who couldn’t care less and drama queens. The former calmly do their work regardless of the details or the broader context, for example, that the building is about to collapse and bury them. The latter will make a drama even out of a bulb replacement. The guys downstairs belonged to the latter group because their curses were becoming louder, more vulgar, and more frequent.

Despite the hardships, we continued working. We removed the furniture from nearly all the rooms on the first floor. There were not many rooms, maybe four or five. But try carrying a couple of metal beds down the stairs. And cabinets, desks, shelves... By ten I was knackered. And I wasn't the only one. My co-workers increasingly went out to get some fresh air, coughed up something, or, on the contrary, tortured their struggling lungs with doses of nicotine, having a medicinal cigarette. I don't smoke; if I didn't have to go up and down the stairs, I would save myself the trouble. That was the reason why I remained on the first floor, opening and leaning out of a window to get some fresh air.

We had just finished the second to last room. My co-workers as well as the professionals had sneaked off into the backyard, and the villa had fallen silent. I left the window open and walked down the corridor to check the cleared rooms. We had done our job well. The first floor was empty, except for one room.

When I entered it, I raised my eyebrows in surprise. There were no metal beds or cheap furniture. The room was equipped with cabinets and a robust desk made of mahogany. All of the furniture was beautifully carved and looked stylish. There was an elegant coffee table and a soft upholstered armchair, but this was covered with such a thick layer of dust that I stepped back.

It was an office. If this building had ever been a sanatorium, this room must have belonged to the director or a senior doctor. I could see several lighter rectangles on the walls. There must have once been paintings here. The wallpaper looked luxurious. Although it was covered with dust, one could recognize its patterns were in tasteful colours.

The tall shelves were empty. However, they must have served as filing shelves because there were letter signs on them. I glanced over them and my eyes rested on a thing below the window.

There was a monster in the corner. A square black safe, a pilgrim from the days gone by. It must have dated back to the times of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Above its door there was the decorative relief of a sign, a crown and two mythical creatures, accompanied by the plain inscription *Anton Maly Wien*. Despite all the decades that had fallen over the safe, and the dust that had stuck to it, it was shining dimly.

It was as if it was biding its time. As if it was lurking and biding its time.

I was totally mesmerized by it. You need to visualize its square shape and its fine outline to understand. A perfect design. It got me bewitched and spellbound.

I approached it. The keyhole was covered with a decorative circle of noble metal.

Below it there was a handle sticking out of the steel door.

I touched it. It was cold.

I clutched my fingers around it and tried turning it, but it didn't budge. I needed the key. Otherwise, nothing would happen.

Without the right key, I didn't stand a chance of getting in. That's what the shape of the safe suggested. It radiated hardness and impregnability. Its look discouraged any attempt to break in by force.

Who knows what's inside? I thought.