

To the Frontier by Ondřej Štindl

Translated by Mike Baugh

Part I

Gunner

They approached the city from the west. Through the material of his uniform, through the armor plating, his body reverberated from the engine; he liked the sweet and soothing smell of its fumes. He leaned back comfortably, closing his eyes to the onslaught of the sun, but the horsepower thudded in his ears. They really knew how to make an engine those Germans. Now they were going after them. Going to finish them off. Other smells began to penetrate the curtain of smoke, the smells of spring, of bloom and rot and the chaos of the countryside upon which they had let slip the metal of war. Stěpan breathed it all in. It was rising drowsily, dizzily, gathering its strength to chase a new dream or chimera. But Stěpan stays motionless, snoozing in his place on the armor. Just then a sprig of lilac brushes his cheek. Strange that there is so much of it here.

He put his hand on the muzzle of the cannon, its power running into his fingers. He can control it, rotate it, command the big metal cock. For this place has never known force like this and maybe it should. It needed to be pocked with craters, to roar with the collapsing of walls and human screams. Cottages, buildings and sheds dot high banks of the river. An absurd idyll, seemingly snatched from the illustrations of a children's book. Even the vehicles in Stěpan's convoy looked like toys among this scenery. They adapted to the neatness of this land far from the gory beauty of great battlefields. This corner of the world will only see the last convulsions of war. Nothing can stop the coming peace. It will spell disaster for the soldiers of Stěpan's army if they don't redeem themselves quickly, if at the last moment they don't slip away among the winners, if they don't disappear in the coming revelry, the dance, the orgies of revenge. In the chaos they could vanish, become insignificant, microscopic. tiny.

The people by the road, however, saw them quite differently. They looked at them in awe and hope, well-fed and wearing their Sunday best. Schoolboys, eyes sparkling with interest in all those war machines. Hardworking old men with dirt under their nails. Fleshy women with worried eyes and their curious young daughters. Canny men with big bellies, ready to greet history's arrival at their village gates. The colonel stopped from time to time, dismounted his horse and handed them a manifesto. When they were printing them up, Stěpan was the one turning the crank of the battalion's mimeograph. The tired machine

fought back as the colonel breathed down his neck, then, muttering with satisfaction, he read the text letter by letter. They created sentences in the creaky style of a person who wants to feel important. Coughing with pathos they called the world to the next war, when the knights of liberty, with the Nazis vanquished, will defeat the Communist hydra. The flag of victory will be raised by the Russian Liberation Army – their division. The local dignitaries politely pretended to read the words, to take them seriously. They nodded their heads; they would nod at anything at that point, mainly so that the mustachioed man on the horse would escort his bizarre army to the the fighting in Prague and chase out the remaining occupiers. So it would be over and they could celebrate. They wanted to celebrate. They were already smiling, coyly and a little scared, their shoulders twitching, when a gunshot sounded from afar.

(...)

Part II

Driver

(...)

He was on summer holiday with his parents when five Warsaw Pact armies invaded. His father and mother decided to stay until everything passed. Michal was suffocating at the cabin; he imagined tanks rumbling through the streets while he was shooting starlings off cherry branches with his air rifle. He should have been aiming at something different and been somewhere else than in the South Bohemian idyll where the most menacing things were the dragonflies zipping over the pond, steel blue and shiny like miniature fighter planes, engines revving. Something was happening in Prague – finally something as monumental as the city deserved. History was screaming through the streets of Prague and Michal was gone. For the first time in his life he was devouring the newspaper, sitting by the radio listening to the serious and intent voices, listening to the distant sound of gunfire during newscasts. He cut out the photo of the bloody flag under the statue of St. Wenceslas; he wanted to carry it in his pocket but thought it would be sacrilegious to fold it.

After his return to Prague he could still feel the reverberations of it all in the walls, but they were disappearing quickly, just as the passion of the crowds of people debating in the streets was fading, they still were not afraid to air their thoughts in front of the world, but their numbers were decreasing. Responsible comrades who had just recently championed the courage of those who had come out against the occupation were suddenly saying that the most important thing was to remain calm. Michal didn't want to stay calm. He wasn't alone. At

the funeral of a student who had set himself on fire, he heard the crowds give vows of loyalty, and he promised it as well. He imagined what it must be like to run engulfed in flames, and it made his blood stop in horrified respect.

He finished seventh grade and they took him away from Prague again; he was determined that this time he wouldn't let his parents lock him away. Everybody expected huge protests for the first anniversary of the occupation and Michal believed it was a war he'd have to fight. He stole money from his father, just enough for the journey, and managed to stay awake all night and climbed out of the window early in the morning to catch the first train. He rushed along an empty road towards the town with the train station. In the crisp and silent cold, Michal trembled with a restlessness and seriousness that he had never known before. He was passing places from his childhood: the forest where they used to pick mushrooms – with his eyes nearly to the ground he would report every discovery, every trampled toadstool, to his amused parents; the flooded old sandpit – “don't swim out any further, it's too deep for you”; the foot bridge over the creek where you could catch pikes and doctor fish if you had the patience to wait and stare at the surface. He knew he was leaving all that behind, even though he might come back next summer. But by then he'd be someone else because today he was going to taste real life, jump in head first; at thirteen he'd see history up close and find himself in it.

When he got off the train in Prague he could already feel the tension on the platform. The air above the city seemed electric, as if it were gathering its strength to explode. As Michal rushed from the Main Station to Wenceslas Square, he imagined sparks dancing around above his head. He got there on time, hadn't missed anything – it hadn't started yet. But there were already a lot of people on the square. Many had bleary and angry eyes; they had experienced the battles of the previous day, the agitation, and also the fury over those two boys who had been shot, was still shaking them. But for now they were each on their own or with their own little group, waiting for a signal, a command that would turn the dawdling crowd into an army. People that, for now were discretely watching one another and guessing which of them was undercover, would connect into a great unified will. Michal was somewhere in the middle of the square when it happened; he couldn't see what caused it, but all of a sudden the waves running through the crowd stopped being random and chaotic; something was emerging. First it was just a scream, but fury and determination kicked in when he saw the white helmets of the cops and their batons swinging like sausages over the heads of the crowd, landing with disgusting and painful smacks. Soon he inhaled the sweetish smell of teargas, his throat itched and his voice strained and sounded adult. He let the crowd drag him, followed it blindly, he ran and stopped, circling back to where he had run away from a minute ago – sometimes without any clear reason, as if the thousands of people were communicating through some silent broadcast, their words garbled in the transmission,

stripped of sense for the recipients. It didn't take long before Michal found himself in the midst of the chaos; he was perfectly at home, nobody knew the city so well, nobody had wandered it like him. Now he was no longer following but setting the course since he knew all the shortcuts and escape paths in the center. He wasn't the only one to find some new resolve in himself with the first hit.

They were becoming a force, as impulsive and chaotic as the city around them. They wanted to conquer it for themselves, for a moment at least, rip it from the clutches of power that kept releasing more and more water cannons and metal monsters, personnel carriers and eventually tanks. They hurled rocks at them. They couldn't stop them, but they made the camouflaged metal chime, made music. In spaces restricted to a few corners, out from under their feet, new nations, free and ephemeral, never exceeding a few moments, were established – Náměstí Republic, the Commonwealth of Trenches, the United Square of Jungmann. The states crumbled under the enfilades and tank-treads of the attacking savages, only to be resurrected a few streets away with dirty banners flying, fireworks launching, and the briefest, unspoken constitution: "We are the People."

Michal raced among them in a crazed effort to be everywhere. He ran through courtyards where the mothers of Old Town were hanging their laundry as if nothing were going on. Their families would have to sleep in bedsheets smelling of tear gas, but that would fade away, just like the storm outside. He ran past churches with bells silent in their steeples, in another era perhaps they could have sought asylum in them. He ran down by the embankment, the sound of his shoes on the cobblestones disturbing the swans as they rocked gently with the tide. He had to pump the brakes on his legs, on the springs inside them, to stay on the ground, to keep from flying off over the rooves, and even further, because right then all he wanted was to be in those streets clamoring with gunshots and chants.

After all the escapes and narrow scrapes, the exhausting retreats and counter-attacks, he didn't feel an ounce of fatigue; the euphoria and the smoke from burning barricades drove him on. He expended energy and absorbed it, experiencing instant harmony with strangers who, like him, found their calling in hurling cobblestones. But they diminished with dusk, the authorities snatched one after the other. And others realized they still had a chance to escape without consequences, they had gotten their fix of fighting, expressed themselves – that was enough. For a moment they fell for the illusion that there was this day and this day alone, but by now they already knew that more days were to come and the powers that be would still be. They'd get stronger, more powerful, swell and roar, and nobody would fight anymore. Today's spurt, today's tremor, was worth it, but it was the last one. Still, Michal's temples throbbed with savage delight; he found new routes through the fragments of liberated land. He ran through the night where close formations took the town

back for good, where tank treads ripped up the pavement and police cars sirens rang through the air instead of rebel shouts. He ran and ran and took a wrong turn.

One was enough.

He ran right into them. The cops knocked him to the ground and silently began to beat the soul out of him. They threw him in a police wagon, with others they had already caught, bloodied and moaning in pain and fear. All of them snatched abruptly from the community they were willing to spill their blood for moments ago. They were struggling for air, sobbing out of helplessness and certainty that retribution would be inflicted upon them on their own. The car started; it didn't go far. They hauled them out on Krakovská street, shouting and punching them on. With their uniforms and guns the fuckers knew they were untouchable. Now they felt completely confident again, strong men at the slaughterhouse gate, their muscles twitching to get to work on the new batch of meat.

Michal dragged himself in the direction of the blows. He was sobbing, couldn't stop and later he didn't even try. They were ordered to stop behind the door of the police station. Then the pigs, the boars, stuffed but hungry for more, emerged from the shadows on both sides of the stairwell. With state police and people's militia caps pulled down low on their foreheads and their batons raised high they furiously and expertly beat the detained as they ran the gauntlet past them. They were trained; they knew how to cause pain. Michal ran screaming, his beaten palms uselessly trying to block the blows raining down from all sides. His body sticky under their base and glistening gaze. This is how the machine gets off. Seeing him exposed, seeing the weakness bare on his face. The path of shame led to the cell door; they slammed the door shut behind them and locked it. Through the bars, a fat cop sneered at them and strutted up and down the hall, his shoes leaving tracks of blood with every step. From time to time, he burped, as if he had just arrived from a particularly sumptuous feast. He hammered the bars with his baton and burst out laughing at their fright. Some pranks never got old.

"You stupid fuck!" said a man with a mustache and overalls looking straight at the cop. In a fair fight he would have mopped the floor with the policeman, and the lump in the uniform must have known it. The man behind the bars smiled. He was the only prisoner who radiated something akin to confidence. Maybe because he worked with his hands. You could read it in his face that since this was a so-called labor state, his opinion should matter.

The pig whistled for backup. They pulled the insubordinate hulk out of the cell and laid into him on the spot, so everyone would see. He tried to fight back, but he didn't stand a chance. He could scream, though. After a while he went quiet and it was easier to hear his bones breaking. In the cell, the prisoners held their breath as the big laborer was dragged away, sliding across the floor like a wet rag. After that they only spoke to the police when they were asked a question. That didn't save them from being hit and humiliated. The police

grabbed them out of the cell one by one; they found out who they were and delivered the type of lesson that leaves bloodstains on the wall. Michal awaited his turn with muscles clenched – maybe if he practiced, it would hurt less.

(...)

Part III

Witness

1989

The national colors screamed out at him from the OF logo of the Civic Forum – a happy face drawn into the O for *Občanské*, the Czech word for “civic.” The smile seemed directed right at him, laughing at him. Next to it on the bulletin board, someone had pinned up a proclamation of the institution’s employees – stiff sentences beginning with “we demand,” “we support,” and “we endure” – and a picture of a demonstrating crowd. It was taken in a serious moment when they were all singing the national anthem, and Ivan could almost see the lyrics in the frozen air above them: the water roars across the meadows / the pinewoods rustle among the crags / *and Ivan is up shit creek.*

He tried to laugh it off and could hear the uneasiness. His own voice frightened him; everything frightened him that night. He looked at the photo again, studied the letters on the homemade banners and the faces of those holding them. Those signs of life. Life was elsewhere, for others, not for him – outside his head, this building, this institution where at twenty-four Ivan Kantner had witnessed the unspeakable.

The blade of the scalpel felt cold against his forearm. He should be careful. He could cut himself like this, ruin the sweater he was hiding it under, the sweater Adéla had knitted for him. Thinking about it, his heart twitched. Maybe she was having a drink somewhere, but, more likely, she had gone to sleep. Other times, he would lie next to her, waiting for his breath to warm up the air under the covers, feel the fabric of her night gown, she would probably be wearing warm socks to bed since their shelter had been cold, drafts blowing through the windows. Behind them was the city, Ivan’s city. The regulars at the pub would be just taking their seats at their tables, heated trams would run their routes as citizens met for heated discussions – only Ivan reels like a lost patrol in no man’s land. She had knitted him this sweater about a year ago. Ivan never really liked it, but he wore it dutifully – you put up with things for love. Or obligation, a sense of guilt that the feelings were fading. Maybe nothing could be done about it. Sorry. But, really, he didn’t want to do anything about it, he didn’t have the energy. Somebody else occupied his thoughts.

He should be careful. Stop thinking about bullshit – look, listen, smell. The fluorescent

lighting buzzed and flickered as an insect of the night beat its wings around the temperamental tubes. Mechanically and melancholically it crashed into the light, but by the end of November all the moths were hibernating or long dead. This one, however, refused to accept it. Otherwise, he was alone. He wasn't there yet. The night guest he'd greet with the knife. Wave the blade, make the gesture, get confirmation: you're ready. He touched his hidden weapon but found no comfort. It can't be enough, maybe nothing would be.

He sat down on the windowsill. He needed to take a rest, to close his eyes for a moment, exhausted by the unpleasant glare. It colored his body a bloodless blue, as if life were clearing out of his body in advance, knew more and gave up. Surely Ivan could too. Pick up and go, nobody would blame him, nobody would even look for him. But he can't just cut Karla loose. There's no one else. He alone knows that it's up to him to stop the one who is coming, to spill blood—the other's and his own. If only that were enough. The resignation faded and the savage desire to stab spread joyously through his veins. He would stand over his opponent's body, staring into his eyes, not looking away until life fades from them. Then he'll leave free, justified, his conscious clean, because this is exactly what it takes to be a man. For centuries man had set off into the darkness to discover the origin of our fear, to face it, stare it down, kill it. This we have forgotten, unlearned. Ivan, however, remembered.

He stood up and looked around the empty hall. The white rubber shoes of the orderly uniform rendering his footsteps almost silent. The building looked down sternly at him, disapproving of Ivan's volatile and feverish route, so inappropriate among all the uncompromising right angles that held the grave edifice together. Ivan's obsession had no place there because it rejected reason. It had no purpose. It surpassed the simple symmetry of everything in that home for asymmetrical children, children whose parts were missing or misshapen, children contorted from palsy or muscular dystrophy. Generations of them had left their imprints there, scribbles in the plaster, stamps from crutches and black smudges from wheelchairs on the institutional linoleum. Now they were asleep. Ivan listened outside the bedroom doors. Silence.

He stepped carefully into the room where Karla lay. He tiptoed in the darkness. The reproductions of famous artists' sketches appeared colorless on the walls and the animals looked dark and sinister. From all sides of the room he could hear the breathing of children. Karla slept peacefully on the bed under the window, her prosthetic leaning on the metal frame of the bed. His fingers touched the object of leather, wood and metal; it was worn down from frequent use. Karla's least durable part. There was a little slipper on the fake foot; the image of it wrenched Ivan's heart. He could usually block out the impact of all the little details that would bowl over visitors to the institution. Ivan was accustomed to it, but sometimes one would still weigh on him. Like now.

There was a new pile of drawings on her night table, more pictures of the Green

Princess. Karla caught her in motion, on the run from an enemy closing in on her from all sides, the princess' skirt caught on branches and ripped by thorns. Chased out of the kingdom, eyes affright, carried by a speed her creator will never know. One day Ivan will get a better look at her paintings, examine them closely and be amazed again. But now there's no time. For a moment longer he stood over the sleeping girl, her hair spread on the pillow, the hair the nurses would fight over to brush. It even happened today – even today as history descended upon the city. He saw the gleam in the eyes of the staff as they discussed the general strike on their cigarette break. The chattered on about those who hadn't shown up, those who'd thrown in with the collapsing regime and were soon to regret it, panicking and alone. In spirit they were all outside with the crowds flying through the streets, determined and overjoyed, growing ever more confident that something big was coming and couldn't be stopped. Shouting below the windows of the regime, they could see it collapsing, progressing, and they felt like the Israelites gathering before the walls of Jericho – victory was providence – everyone could feel it. Except Ivan.

He joined the strike as well, pinned a tricolor to his sweater, listened patiently. So many people had an urgent need to talk, to eagerly announce to the world that they had discovered inside themselves the ability to make a stand. But Ivan's mind was elsewhere. The biggest moment in the life of his contemporaries wasn't big enough for him, even though he himself could never have imagined that something like this could happen, that the regime he loathed, the crude and brutal cage of flesh, a cage of people for people, could be torn asunder. Now it was happening and he couldn't even show any interest, become part of the new fellowship that was making strangers, in this town of unapproachable faces and lowered gazes, smile and talk to each other. All of this just descended disconcertingly into Ivan's world. A new reality was being born, but it didn't mean anything to Ivan – he wouldn't see it, the upcoming encounter would probably destroy him or push him past the brink of insanity.

He looked at Karla one more time, and at that moment he stopped noticing the voices of the building, the creaking, the hissing, and the sounds of small bodies tossing. In the silence he stared at her and he knew at that moment that his conscience was clear, that everything he might have been guilty of towards her was erased and forgotten. Because now he was completely devoted to her, he wanted nothing from her and was ready to sacrifice everything, even himself. So no one would take her to his den, to his cave where children are imprisoned by animals in human form that talk to their prey so seductively, so sweetly. So that no one would take her to a better place where her incomplete body would no longer constrain her, where she'd become free and independent from the help of others. So that no one would take her away from Ivan. Because Karla was his. He had won the right to her and that right he would defend. He would slash eternity with the scalpel, if he had to, he would fight God Himself if He comes for his girl. He smiled nervously and headed past the sleeping

children to the door and further out into the hall.

Something was different. The artificial light had stabilized, but the walls of the institution started to shiver, thinned out to the point of translucence, and the air was brilliant and clear. A breeze blew in from somewhere. An almost imperceptible chill spread through the building. But it didn't burn, it went right through the skin and hit the bones, made them freeze and grow brittle. It was a chill from some other age, a place without time. It was preceding someone, the one who was waiting for Ivan. He was ready as well. In that second Ivan saw his folly. What was he thinking, for heaven's sake, who did he think he was? He let the hidden knife slip into his palm and resignedly, as if devoid of any other option, he headed to the stairs.

He descended through the growing chill; it must have been coming from somewhere downstairs. On the floor with the school, the light was off. Ivan peered out the window. November snow swirled in the lamplight outside the institution; the settled snow was clean and undisturbed by footprints from anything alive. Well then. He walked on, running his hand along the bannister. He may have been bidding farewell to this piece of polished wood and brass knobs. Farewell. Farewell, granite floor. Farewell, key to the service elevator. Farewell, bust of the founder on the ground floor. Farewell, hands of the young woman who knitted this sweater that isn't warm enough. Farewell. And already it hurts. The nation outside the windows called for freedom, but only Ivan bore it in all its lightness, in all its horror. In that moment the institution was already far away, Karla was far away, and yet he could feel her next to him. That was the only reason he hadn't flown up to the ceiling and shot out of there like in one of his dreams where he was flying. The chill grew even worse when he arrived at the ground floor. The basement door was ajar: a sign for him. He must continue his descent.

The light was off, but at the end of the corridor he could see flames from the open door of the furnace – they reflected off the blade of the knife in his hand. Out of the darkness the door to the boiler room emerged before his eyes – a few more steps and he was inside. The chill spread out from here, from this room where flickering flames illuminated the pipes running along the walls and under the ceiling. Despite the incredible warmth of the color, they glowed cold. The glow radiated from the black cast-iron monster, gleaming out into the entire building. From its mouth came a quiet hum as crimson blazes danced within, blinding Ivan's eyes with black spots. Then the hum, the glow, and even the black spots vanished. Ivan saw everything clearly. The flames in the furnace stopped still and glowed cold like crimson icicles. Ivan raised his hand; he still could, and clouds of steam continued to rise from his mouth, disappearing into the darkness. Only the flames had stopped. Perhaps because of Ivan. So they wouldn't distract him from seeing the right one. The one waiting in the corner. Leaning his head against the wall, or perhaps hanging from something. Drooped and dangling like black overalls about to be worn. A homunculus waiting... to be born. Then it

happened.

The silhouette shivered, it tilted its head like a dancer stretching out its stiff neck. Then the shadow turned. Ivan couldn't see its face, his eyes were blind from the glare, the black spots running before them again. The knife slipped in his sweaty hand, sliced his palm; he felt blood running between his fingers. It felt cold. The figure before him came unglued from the wall. Some sort of glisten remained after it, a window to a different place, beyond the border of the known world, of known life, but it lasted merely a moment, and then it was just bricks covered with soot. Ivan mustered all of his strength, he would still try to fulfill his duty. He'll get in his fighting stance, tear down the colorful curtain before his eyes. He will say something. It takes the same effort as if he were speaking out of a deep sleep – his throat full of ash, every muscle in his body resisting the formation of words.

“Leave.”

The shadow didn't react. It walked to the door slowly, its first steps shaky. Ivan waved his hand in a gesture of warning; the knife blade glinted and the shadow stopped. It tilted its head to the side again. Almost inadvertently it raised its hand and tapped a pipe on the wall. It had quick, confident fingers – a pianist woven out of darkness – its nails slightly overgrown. It played. The sound spread through the hollow iron to Ivan's proximity. And then Ivan heard a chime, the scalpel had slipped from his hand to the floor and Ivan followed. He was convulsing and spasming, as if seized by the sacred disease. He couldn't control his own limbs. The ceiling of the boiler room swung before his eyes to the rhythm of the seizures, colorful lights flashed, images passed by, some he recognized, his palm full of glowing carbon that he carried through an autumn night once in a dream. The shaking didn't stop. Ivan could feel the foam running from his mouth. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the shadow approaching, walking straight and confident now. The scalpel lay within Ivan's reach, but he couldn't reach out his hand to grab it. The shadow came within reach, yellow dots transformed into white heat, like some sadistic little shit in space had focused the beams of the sun through a magnifying glass pointed right at Ivan.

It'll come soon. The shadow will make one more unexpected gesture, negligently and beyond the rhythm of his walk. He'll touch Ivan, will suck everything out of him except for one drop and he'll let him float through the darkness forever, weightless, conscious. Except Ivan wasn't worth it to him. The shadow stepped over him, disinterested and unconcerned, like a stick on a path, an uninteresting piece of wood. The silhouette quickly flashed past Ivan's eyes: it wasn't black, more a dark blue – the color of a clear night sky if the stars went out. And then the shadow was gone and Ivan stopped shaking, lying limp on the boiler room floor, seeping out. The world settled around him. Ivan could feel every grain of dirt under him and each drop of sweat on his face; he was aware of the heat in boiler room. His mind screamed commands from the last remnant of his will, but he remained locked in his listless body.

Among the sounds of the sleeping building came one more. It came from the main stairwell, but at the same time from somewhere else, from the world beyond the border he had seen the shadow cross. The sound of a man's steps, a man running, flying, a man who barely touched the ground with his feet, the bastard. The voice of a child came to him, a voice he knew well. Karla had no idea what it meant to run away. She knew no other gait than the bizarre syncopated rhythm that the ingeniously designed prosthetic gave the child's step. Someone is carrying her in his arms. Carrying her away. Still, he heard Karla laugh. He began to shake again, to seize up in sobs devoid of tears. Because they were taking her away from him, they were taking her away and he couldn't do anything about it. They could go anywhere; he was stuck here. And Karla knew it and she laughed anyway. If she could see him lying there on the boiler room floor foaming at the mouth, she wouldn't stop, she wouldn't see him as anything other than a discarded toy that no longer deserved her attention, that she no longer liked. Because Ivan is powerless and children are cruel. They can forget something just as soon as something more interesting comes along. He was the one, in his stupidity, who had deluded himself into thinking it could be different between them. And before the footsteps grew quiet, he heard the voice. It was quiet, but still it burst his eardrums and in his mouth he tasted metal.

"Settle down, lad."