

A Theory of Strangeness by Pavla Horáková

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1. On Communication, Sloping Streets, and Midlife Crises

I looked around the century-old buildings I'd passed on my way to work countless times before. Nearly black at the bottom and getting progressively lighter with each additional storey, their facades were indisputable proof that noxious fumes keep close to the ground. I held my breath subconsciously. For years now, this street, as well as the surrounding ones, had been almost completely void of any permanent inhabitants. The stores on the ground floor either stood empty or changed dodgy tenants faster than a chameleon changes colors. Not a stick of greenery within sight; just grime and more grime. And amidst all that, the Institute for Interdisciplinary Human Research.

The traffic lights started clicking frantically and turned green. I crossed the street toward the metal front door – a relic of the 1970s that clashed with the Neo-Renaissance frontage. The closer I got the more I felt repelled by it. After ten years of spending every working day in this place, sometimes even weekends and vacations, I had developed a deep aversion to the building and everything it stood for. It was by this front door that would have been much more appropriate in a Communist-era prefab high-rise, with an aluminum handle and a grimy pane of wire mesh glass, that my disgust manifested itself most. My hand must have pressed a dent into the metal over the years.

I breathed in the last gulp of foul air from the street and entered the darkened hallway. The smell inside had not changed for years: a mixture of the outside smog, mustiness and damp, cigarette smoke permeating the porter's cubicle (the non-smoking rule was generally disregarded, if there even was one), and instant coffee. Only the grainy, flickering, monochrome screen of the ancient portable television had been replaced by the steadier glow of a newer model.

Like every morning, I greeted the porter, Mr. Kožnar, also known around here as Hook because he only had one arm. He had been a porter here as long as anyone in the institute could remember. Under his tenure, the institute had had ten different directors, changed its name five times, and had been closed down and reestablished twice, depending on the current political climate.

The institute's librarian, Valerie Hauserová, was another such constant. Looking at her, few would realize that the mousy sixty-something in a white nylon lab coat was actually the most educated and highest-qualified person within these walls. In fact, she once used to be the head of the institute. But then, just before the end of her tenure, she resigned, completely out of the blue. She terminated all of her research, shredded all her files, and moved both her few remaining possessions and her humble self to a tiny office with a much worse view and furnishings than her previous one.

It turned out she had resigned for personal reasons. Her son, an only child and a very precocious young man, had been declared missing shortly before that. He had never been found. She never said a word about it, and after a few failed attempts to coax it out of her, people stopped asking. She always arrived first, long before seven, and locked up the library precisely at three o'clock in the afternoon. The rest of the employees routinely grumbled about these opening hours, which tended not to overlap with their usual work schedule, but no amount of complaining had yet managed to change the situation. Sometimes I stopped by, usually when I didn't feel motivated enough to work.

"Would you like some green tea?" she called with her raspy smoker's voice when she saw me in the doorway. "The water's still hot."

I was baffled. I'd never seen Valerie eat or drink anything even approaching a healthy diet. She was deeply resentful toward all sorts of new-fangled stuff. She usually went through several strong Turkish coffees a day, an awful swill made of cheap ground coffee and boiling water with the dregs left in the cup, and two lumps of sugar. She noticed my surprise and pointed to a steaming glass full of some deep green liquid.

"A shot of peppermint liqueur with hot water. I think I might be coming down with something," she explained. "Don't tell me you've never tried it, Ada."

Knowing Valerie, I was pretty sure she'd just made the recipe up. Then I realized that besides breakfast, I'd also skipped brushing my teeth. Hot water with peppermint liqueur might actually work better than toothpaste.

"Would you like some sugar with that?" Valerie asked. I shook my head. "I'm going out for a quick fag. You can go with me if you want," she offered.

The bleak librarian's office opened onto a terrace right next to the library. The terrace overlooked the street, which was certainly no scenic view, but for a heavy smoker of Valerie's caliber it was a true blessing.

We sat at a dusty table and warmed our hands on glasses of the venomous-looking beverage. Long lines of vehicles trailed below us, spurred onward by the regularly changing stoplights: the peristaltic movement of traffic. The cars moved in long strips, each movement propelling them from one traffic light to the next and stopping again. And again. The foul fumes produced by the vehicles lent even more support to the intestinal analogy. Inhaling

and releasing additional smoke of one's own volition seemed almost wasteful. Or perhaps it was the other way around: surrounded by all this hopeless pollution, did inhaling a few more carcinogenic substances really matter?

"Any news on Robert?" Valerie asked after a moment.

"No, nothing."

"No news is good news, I guess," she said. Then she fell silent again.

Just a few months back, Robert was still my so-called significant other. When I met him I'd had just about enough of all those intellectuals who couldn't put up a shelf if it crawled up a wall on its own. And so I found a man who hadn't even graduated high school but who acted like an adult, who was brawny and muscular, had his own company and his own car and couldn't care less about my two PhDs. I learned to live with his uncomplicated masculinity, persuading myself that this was what real life was like, that repressing myself would make me a better person and turn me into a grown-up woman. On weekends, I cooked wholesome traditional meals while he watched sports on TV; I wiped up yellow splotches around the toilet; and secretly put earplugs in at night so I could sleep through his snoring. I got used to him, even learned to love him, and I sort of started to count on him being there. The last time I saw him he was printing out some document on the home printer. I was not snooping, really; I just sort of happened upon it. It was a criminal record certificate. A brand-new, squeaky clean criminal record certificate. A fake one, of course. I knew he was on probation. I only learned about all those other convictions and debt recovery notices much later. By then Robert was on the run, having made off with all of his possessions, and some of mine too. I had no idea which country he was now hiding in from extradition. I knew I'd never get back the money he'd borrowed from me for various bad investments. Just as I knew I'd never see him again. I was actually glad he was gone. What I could not forgive myself for was my willingness to turn myself inside out, to force myself to conform, both to him and to convention.

All I had left of him was a few holes in the wall, and another gaping hole where my trust in others used to be. I would have very much liked to make him compensate me for life wasted. "Everything that's happening now is just a prequel to all the miracles that are bound to come," Valerie tried to persuade me back then. So far I was still waiting.

We looked down onto the busy street. Cars, people, goods and ideas, all of it constantly traveling from place to place. When this constant communication was interrupted, it spelled trouble. That's what my therapist used to say when she tried to make me talk about my problems.

"The only thing that actually manages to stay here is the grime," I remarked, pointing down onto the street. "Look at that corner store over there. How many times has it changed tenants over the last few years? And now it's closed down again."

“Well, it’s just like the vascular system, honey,” said Valerie, puffing on her cigarette. “This is a diseased artery, full of toxic stuff that clogs it. Like cholesterol crystals. And once all that settles in, it only attracts more nasty things. That’s why we only have sex shops, pawn shops and slot machine bars around here. Filth attracts filth,” she finished, blowing out smoke.

“These dodgy places tend to gravitate to streets that slope downhill, have you noticed?” I mused. “As long as a street is on level ground, there are bakeries, cafés, stationery stores, butcher shops... But as soon as it starts going down, you get all those makeshift corner stores, bars, goodwill shops, wedding dress rentals and junk shops.”

Valerie gave it some thought. “I guess people don’t like to walk up- or downhill. Both customers and store owners, I mean. That makes rents cheaper. So if you need to open a place as soon as you can to make some quick money with minimal investment, it’s much easier to find one in a bad location.”

“Or perhaps it’s because all the good things succumb to gravity,” I suggested. “The quality stuff either stays up on top, or flows all the way down. Only the really slimy and sleazy things manage to cling to the slopes, for a while at least.”

Valerie patted my shoulder indulgently.

“Perhaps I could suggest it at today’s meeting,” I said, and gave her a wink. “Do we have anyone specializing in anthropological geography? It would make for a good research topic. ‘Sociopathological Phenomena in Relation to Uneven Urban Terrain.’ Sounds dumb enough to attract some grant money, don’t you think?”

Valerie laughed so hard she had a coughing fit. Unfortunately, I wasn’t feeling so cheerful myself. My own research had been going nowhere for some time and no matter what I did, I remained resolutely stuck. “All right, I’d better get going,” I said, and got up to leave. “Thanks for the green tea.”

“You’re welcome,” Valerie said. “Hang in there.”

How often had I heard those words lately? How often had I said them myself? Is there a specific point in life when friends start parting with a “hang in there” rather than a simple “bye” or “take care”? Or was I simply so overwhelmed by my current misery that I saw trouble wherever I looked? Perhaps the notorious midlife crisis had decided to show up way before I’d actually managed to acquire all that wisdom and wealth that was supposed to come with middle age. You can act young and dress young, you can try to put off adulthood and all its obligations and commitments as hard as you can, but you can’t really trick time. My list of losses was constantly growing.

(...)

7. On the Bristol Stool Chart, Historical Legacy, and Weekend Homes

The Bristol Stool Chart is a practical medical tool designed to help patients and physicians diagnose various intestinal disorders. It depicts, in a very colorful and lifelike manner, seven categories of human feces, from rock-hard pellets to brown sludge. When I first glimpsed the Bristol Stool Chart, a sense of profound peace fell upon me. Here was incontrovertible proof that in this one aspect, all human beings were truly equal, and that I myself was unquestionably human. Whatever we might drop into the toilet bowl every day, however exceptional, uniquely unpleasant or relieving we might believe the products of our effort to be, billions of others are experiencing the same relief or disappointment staring at the content of their privies as we are. Number one on the chart are dry, crusty black chestnuts. Number two: lumps compressed into a single, sausage-like object, sort of like an oblong blackberry. Third on the chart is a firm, solid piece of shit, with slight cracks on the surface. Number four is a long, smooth, perfectly streamlined excrement. Five comes out as soft, sticky blobs. Six: mushy, ragged pieces. And finally, number seven, one shitload of a diarrhea.

I bought a poster of the Bristol Stool Chart in England, and gave it as a birthday present to Aleš Drlík, who was the most meticulous person about his excretions that I knew. Every single morning, at 08:05 precisely, he could now dutifully compare his toilet creations with the standard prototypes. I'd long stopped noticing the poster, but visitors tended to find it unnerving. Perhaps I should take it down.

If you happen to manage number two, three or four, which make the use of toilet paper a mere formality, it brings you a certain sense of happiness. I flushed down a perfect three, said hi to the daddy longlegs hiding behind the toilet bowl, and congratulated myself for a day well started. It might, after all, turn out to be the only satisfying feat of the day. My diary for today contained a single ominous entry: "Boss's birthday." There would be a party in the institute this afternoon. It was the boss's fiftieth, so attendance was strictly mandatory. For occasions like this, I could thankfully delve into my father's remaining reserves of the bribes he'd received from his patients. Even in his decline, he'd retained enough good sense to distribute the more valuable commodities, like vintage wine and spirits, among his family, and only laid out the utter crap in the clinic's hallway. A bottle of decent whiskey, still in its original box, would make an adequate enough gift for my superior.

Brushing my teeth, I recalled the dream I'd had last night. In it, I found myself at a huge mansion, owned by a modern-day but conservative aristocratic family. The door to the courtyard was covered with thick metal sheets. I was tapping at the door with some kind of crowbar. "Don't do that!" the lady of the house kept yelling at me. I found a hollow spot under the metal sheet and pried it off with the crowbar. Skillfully hidden within the door was a

unicycle with a white saddle, the kind that clowns in a circus use. “Who were you trying to prevent from becoming whatever they wanted?” I called. An ancient convertible pulled up next to me, driven by a corpulent gentleman in his sixties. “What do you mean, who were we trying to prevent?” And I realized that it was actually this respectable aristocrat who’d once wanted to become a circus performer but, bound by strict family traditions, he’d buried his dreams himself.

Whatever the dream was supposed to mean, I had no intention of telling Aleš about it. Walking past the Dancing House, I experimentally graded a few tourists (all of them fives or lower) and continued uphill along Resslova Street. The street may have looked like it had been there forever, but in fact it had only been built a little over a century ago. It used to end right below the Church of St. Cyril and Methodius, and then there were only houses, all the way down to the river. Some of my favorite locations were on my way to work, like Charles Square: a park so pointless that it had become a popular spot for the homeless to hang out. Years of empirical observation had resulted in my discovery that most homeless men had very thick hair. Luxuriant, almost. My test group was so large that bias or error was practically impossible. Baldies numbered less than one percent. What to make of this, though? Did harsh living conditions somehow prevent hair loss? Was it some sort of secondary hirsutism, caused by living out in the open? Was the gene for thick hair somehow responsible for asocial tendencies as well? Considering the amount of money that goes into developing various men’s hair loss treatment products, it might be a topic worth researching. The results could both help detect people prone to homelessness and cure baldness, if it actually turned out that hair thickness was related to lifestyle choices. It could become a veritable goldmine. What kind of hair did Kaspar have now, by the way? Lost in all these musings, I finally made it to work.

The third most important person in the Institute for Interdisciplinary Human Research, after Hook the porter and Valerie the librarian, was Marcela Boháčková, manager of the director’s office. Complex systems always tend to be governed by secretaries. An office manager has far more real power than the institution’s executive officers. She gets to decide all the small, everyday things. She can easily manipulate her boss’ decisions, or she can even decide *for* him; and she has some dirt on practically everyone. Marcela’s favorite activities included ordering, purchasing, organizing, reporting, and bossing people around. It’s people like Marcela, with their insistence on following rules and enforcing them whether or not they actually make sense, who are responsible for systems becoming increasingly bureaucratic and byzantine. Marcela was ecstatic whenever she could give vent to creativity amidst her mostly routine duties, and the boss’s birthday party was an ideal opportunity. I couldn’t help but notice that she’d had her hair done, her heels were a good inch higher than usual and her make-up far less conservative. She stomped down the hallway, whispering

something into her phone, covering her mouth with her hand and looking very secretive. I decided I wouldn't even try to guess what kind of surprise she had in store for the boss. I disappeared in my office as fast as I could, firmly determined to make some progress today. I opened a file named NOTES: a hodgepodge of thoughts and ideas related to my current research topic – mutual affinity and attraction based on appearance. I went through them one by one.

— *Does mutual attraction happen in the subcortex, or in the higher brain structures?*

— *Similarity to dogs? Some dog breeds can't stand one another even without previous experience of any kind.*

— *DNA comparison: could people who like each other come from the same tribe?*

Next on the list was the link to a recent American study that had managed to identify two specific genes allegedly responsible for people's ability to establish friendships. Carriers of one of the genes tended to gravitate toward one another, whereas carriers of the other kept their distance. The lead author came up with the groundbreaking idea that perhaps those genes were the reason why we tend to like or dislike people at first sight for no good reason at all. "We often feel instinctive aversion or attraction toward people without knowing where it comes from," said a quote I'd copied from the summary. Groundbreaking indeed. However, the study also offered a hypothesis that said genes could manifest in certain physical features that people may instinctively recognize. That actually made some sense.

I felt a wave of indignation swell up inside me. The more I thought about it the more I believed that mutual attraction and dislike had nothing to do with genes or experience, but that some kind of metaphysics was actually involved. Sadly, the idea of carrying good or bad karma from previous lives would get me nowhere in academia, even if I was convinced that it was imprinted in our genes as much as in our horoscopes. Analyzing mutual compatibility based on natal charts would be much more fun than DNA sequencing. As a diagnostic method, it was probably precise enough for my needs, and much faster. *I don't belong here at all*, I thought, and switched tabs to a news website.

A fully loaded truck whose driver lost control of the vehicle crashed in the town of Mohelnice in the Šumperk region this afternoon. No one was injured in the accident. "The truck's brakes failed, the vehicle veered out of the emergency lane into the opposite direction and entered the town. Thankfully, the driver managed to steer the truck loaded with bottled mineral water enough to avoid hitting people and other vehicles, and the truck eventually came to a stop in one of the townspeople's garden," said a Šumperk police officer.

I raised my head and spotted Ivan Mrázek, one of my coworkers, coming through the door. A sudden thought entered my mind.

"Hey, Ivan, where did you say you were from?" I called to him.

"A little town near Šumperk. Why?"

“Oh, I was just wondering,” I said vaguely.

Mrázek took off his jacket, washed his hands and started putting on hand cream. More than ever, I saw him as a kindred spirit. “Ivan,” I said, “don’t you ever feel like all this is completely pointless? I mean, working here, in the institute. What we do. Like all of this research is absolutely ridiculous?”

Mrázek kept meticulously rubbing cream into his fingers, one by one. “Look,” he said, adopting the patient tone usually reserved for small children, “it’s quite possible that our research might not yield any useful results. But someone actually has to discover that, no? I don’t really think about it. I found my little niche in this world, and someone is actually paying me for it. Doesn’t this prove my capability? Survival of the fittest and all that? I’ve come out on top of my competitors, I’ve secured my place on the labor market, so I have more than justified my existence,” he concluded with a self-satisfied smile, as if it were actually some kind of a coup.

“Don’t you ever regret that we’re not doing anything of real value?” I asked. “Like... mining coal, healing people?”

“If you were a coalminer, you’d be blaming yourself for destroying the environment. As a doctor, you’d have to heal anyone, even someone like Hitler if he were fatally ill. Healthcare costs a fortune and everyone is going to die anyway. There’s one unquestionable upside to our work: we’re not harming anyone or anything. And as long as the government keeps paying us for it, we’re going to do what we’re expected to do. We can’t be all that useless after all, if they can spare the cash to support us.”

Perhaps Ivan was right in his pragmatism. Or he simply didn’t have so much self-doubt. Or he did, but would never admit it.

I spent the rest of the morning updating our database of respondents and volunteer participants, in case I might need to call them at some point.

Lunch break finally came and saved me from my toil. As a little girl, back in school, I used to stare out of the window and daydream about walking through the Prague morning, fresh and dewy and empty of people, which it actually was back then. In my mind, I would wander through the abandoned courtyards of the Prague Castle, stand by the river and take in all the sights. Whenever I actually found myself out of school on weekdays, the world outside, which was normally forbidden to me, seemed somehow different, intoxicating. These days, the city was crowded even on weekdays and no longer seemed so magical; but stuck here at work, the idea still held its charm. Today, however, it actually made me pause. I was an adult, I didn’t answer to anyone but myself, and yet I wasn’t free to come and go as I pleased. I was confined to the same place day after day, I had to clock in and clock out, and I was not allowed more than five weeks of freedom a year. Lunch break was a welcome

opportunity to escape, if only for a little while. Was this the adult world we had once dreamed of? How come nobody could see how absurd it all was? How could we have let this happen?

Out in the grimy, smelly street, I breathed in my freedom. I felt a strange pull toward Wenceslas Square. It was nothing but a blatant display of commercialism these days, but I still somehow associated it with freedom and fun. As a young girl from a housing estate on the outskirts of the city, I used to go down there with my girlfriends after school, just to walk and look around, dressed to the nines and smelling of spray deodorant smuggled in from West Germany. Sometimes I could still smell it there.

Halfway down the square I turned into a shopping arcade and bought an ice cream sundae in a wafer cone: first time ever I actually had ice cream for lunch. Real whipping cream, fruit sherbet, slices of banana and caramel nut topping: it tasted exactly as it used to, twenty years ago. The familiar taste was comforting and invigorating. I savored the sundae, walking slowly past shop windows. As I passed a McDonald's, I gasped so loud I nearly choked on a piece of nut. Sitting at a window table was Valerie. It was a shock to see someone so resistant to all things fashionable and consumerist sipping Coke with a straw and munching on French fries. I finished my wafer and walked in. What on earth was she doing here, I asked. To my surprise, she gave me a straight answer. Kaspar used to come here, she explained; he would sit right at this table, watching out the window. She was trying to figure out *what* it was he might have been watching. This was probably the first time I heard her willingly mention her missing son, and I was so perplexed I wasn't able to say another word. Valerie quickly changed the subject. "Come on, let me show you something," she said.

We walked out of the restaurant, passing a group of junkies with their dogs, arguing loudly by the metro entrance. Toothless men in filthy clothes hobbled back and forth. A girl with the skin of an old woman was poking the sores on her forearms. Her dyed hair was showing a good two inches of roots. We passed the statue of St. Wenceslas and went down Ve Smečkáč Street. It was a dodgy place that anyone would be sensible to avoid, notorious for its brothels, shady music halls, sleazy nightclubs and other tourist traps. The street was gloomy, not a tree or a strip of grass in sight. The popular theater located here was the only light amid all this doom and gloom.

"You can tell this is a zone of evil just by looking at it," I said, noting the sloping ground.

"Aptly said," she agreed. "I was thinking about what you said the other day, about the pathogenic zones. This street's had a bad reputation since the Middle Ages. The name supposedly comes from the expression *smek hacě*, which means 'he took off his pants.' It might only be a legend, but still, it tells you something, doesn't it? Merchants might have come here to take a leak, or for a little romp."

We passed another sleazy brothel. A few moments later, Valerie stopped by a pink-painted building. The sign over the door said Hostel. Kitchen odors wafted to us from the passageway.

“Have a look at this,” she said, pointing at a plaque right above the door.

“Nikola Tesla, Serbian scientist, stayed in this house in the years 1880–1881,” I read out loud. I’d had no idea Tesla ever came to Prague, let alone stayed here for any length of time.

“He studied here, at the technical university, but he wasn’t happy. He struggled with the Czech version of Austrian bureaucracy.” That seemed like a petty reason to dislike Prague, which was then a beautiful city in its prime. But then I realized that someone as perceptive as Tesla could never have been happy living in a place like this.

“It must have been a torture, staying here,” said Valerie. “Nowadays we would say that the street has a bad vibe to it. But there are many of these ancient ‘zones of evil’ in this city.” She had obviously given this some thought. “Look over there,” she went on, pointing back toward Wenceslas Square. “There, on the other side. Opletalova Street. It’s been there for ages. In the fourteenth century, they used to call it Chudobice, ‘a place of the poor.’ And what is it known as today?”

“Sherwood!” I blurted out, remembering the nickname awarded to the park near the Main Station. In the early 1990s, it had been overrun by countless unsavory characters, mostly former convicts who’d been freed by the president’s amnesty. It had remained a refuge for vagrants, junkies and criminals ever since. The former “Place of the Poor” was still frequented by the needy and the destitute.

“And right next to it,” Valerie continued, “we have the Petschek Palace, former headquarters of the German Gestapo. And across the street is the seat of the Communist party. A real twilight zone. Or take Bartolomějská Street,” she went on. “In the Middle Ages, it was full of warehouses and sleazy taverns. And then, under communism, a seat of the secret police, where they interrogated and tortured suspected dissidents. I hate that street. All that evil still seems to be hanging in the air.”

“Perhaps people should actually study the historical maps of the city before they decide to move in somewhere,” I said with a smirk. Or before they decided to invest in property, I thought. Aleš might find this useful for that start-up of his. He could provide client consultations on the historical legacy of various Prague locations. Rich people actually tend to be open-minded about the supernatural. At least that was what Sylva told me; and unlike me she actually *knew* some millionaires.