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To Them, I Am God

summary

The novel takes place over the course of a year and a half beginning from March 1999. Its protagonist is a Czech thirty-three-year-old scientist who is accepted for a postdoctoral position at the University of Bergen in Norway. He is convinced his scientific work would not be appreciated in his homeland, so he leaves the Czech Republic. Right from the start, the main character comes off as a self-confident young man who is sharply critical not only of the conditions in Czech society after the Velvet Revolution, but also of corruption and the scientific and higher education communities.

In the prologue, which takes place in March and sees the protagonist visiting his future workplace, he is confronted with the distinctive climate of the city of Bergen, heavily influenced by the Gulf Stream. It rains nonstop and the sky is permanently overcast, so it is hard to tell what time of day it is, especially with the contrast of overly bright indoor lighting.

In May, he takes up his post. He moves into a university apartment, expecting it to become his new home. He is determined to sever all ties to the Czech Republic. From the very beginning, he is terrified of silence and loneliness because this is his first time living by himself. Gradually, he gets acquainted with his surroundings and his co-workers, who are friendly and courteous, but he slowly begins to feel like they do not understand him. He discovers that the rain and wind never stop. His plans of frequenting bars and having fun are crushed when it becomes clear the place is a ghost town. Back home, he would play sports, hike up mountains, and go biking. He refuses to drive or take the bus to the university (because it's not environmentally friendly) and gets a bike. By the time he gets to the university, he is always soaked and freezing, so others look at him like he's lost his mind. Over time, he grows lonely. He often reminisces about his life in the Czech Republic, where he was a band member, a successful student, a budding, talented scientist, everybody's favorite friend, and an irresistible lover who could get anyone he wanted. Where he always knew what was right when it came to the society, his friends and especially women. He comes to realize why he wanted to leave the Czech Republic in the first place – he didn't want to live “among fools, stupid with aggressive consumerism, which wasn't around under communism, fools who interpreted freedom to mean they could do whatever they want to.” He comments on the Czech Republic of the 1990s with sarcasm, seeing nothing positive about it.

But he is not happy in Bergen, either. He feels increasingly more isolated. He cannot get used to the persistent rain and wind, he finds it hard to reconcile with the fact that days and nights look the same, he does not understand local customs and refuses to adapt to them, his colleagues talk to him less and less and he starts to avoid them. University events (like a boat trip combined with eating fresh shrimp and an olive oil tasting) only deepen his feeling of isolation. He starts drinking to combat loneliness (he buys his first bottle of whiskey using the last of his remaining money and when he gets his first paycheck, he immediately buys another one). When he pops back to the Czech Republic to defend his dissertation, he finds that he no longer feels at home there because no one understands him, but he also begins to regret leaving the Czech Republic.

As the winter sets in and the days grow even darker, he begins to sink into depression. He discovers he has sadistic tendencies. He remembers how he would hurt people in the past, especially the women who loved him, without even realizing he was hurting anyone. He tortures a bird and a cat to death and realizes that he finds pleasure in violence: „...it gave him pleasure, not the sexual kind, but the kind you get from seeing the suffering of a weak and helpless living being, a pleasure much stronger and more intoxicating than an orgasm – never-ending, intense and lasting.“ He succumbs to guilt, despair and self-pity. He talks to no one but himself.

A Christmas visit to his parents' ends in an argument. He is rude to his mother and father. He feels alone even when he is with friends. He buys a car and eventually flees back to Norway. He uses his car to escape Bergen every now and then, to get away from not only rain but also his nightmares. On his very first trip, he almost drives off a cliff because his car has summer tires on. Another time he almost dies on a hike to the mountains. He becomes more and more closed off and hypersensitive to noise. A visit from one of his Czech girlfriends only results in a steeper descent into alcoholism. He doesn't eat or work, he just drinks. He escapes to the mountains again, where he almost loses his life.

When he returns to Bergen, he tries to stop drinking, but fails, overconsuming instead of depriving himself. When he starts looking for scientific job offers elsewhere to escape Bergen, he comes across a group of Czechs and Slovaks in Bergen on the internet. After months of solitude, he finds himself among people he can talk to. He attends their regular meetings and learns about their individual fates. They tell him about their occupations and about why they left their homeland; the reasons vary, from personal and political to economic. He discovers that each of them has their own personal issues they are unaware of and gets into conflict with them as well. He takes a liking to one of the young women, the au pair Eva, and invites her on a trip. He can feel she is fond of him as well and he longs for her, but does not so much as touch her for fear of hurting her. Their relationship fails. The protagonist feels like the walls are closing in even more than before. He turns to the mountains again, but not even exhausting

hikes can help him, and neither can attending social events. When he does attend social events with fellow Czechs and Slovaks, he remains an observer, feeling disgust and contempt. He ends up giving up on his life in Bergen. In a bar, he announces to his Czech companions that he is leaving for Australia.

The novel *To Them, I Am God* is divided into eleven chapters. While a third-person narrative, the story is told from the main character's point of view. Political reality and depictions of the Norwegian landscape are thus presented solely through his consciousness.