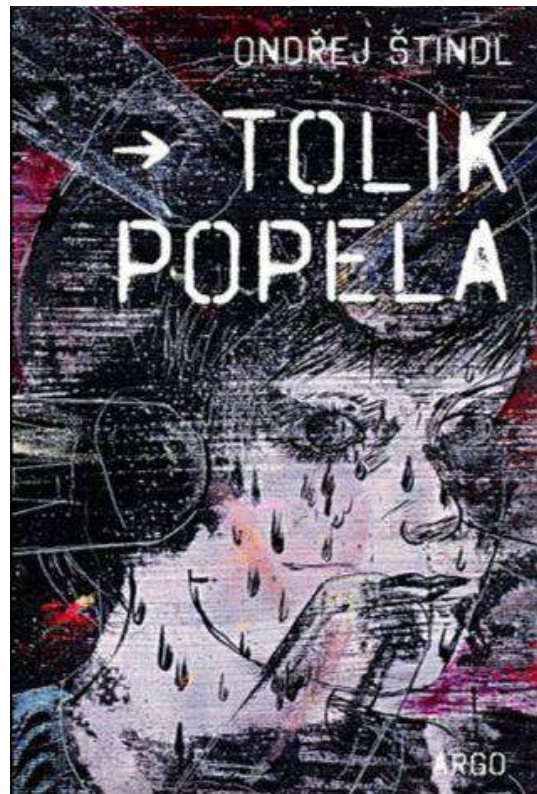




**Winner of the Czech round of the European Union
Prize for Literature**



So Much Ash

Author's best novel to date takes place in Prague during the pandemic

by **Ondřej Štindl**

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An ageing writer and translator, Kryštof abruptly finds himself at a crossroads when he meets the young leftist intellectual Kristýna and, not long afterwards, Kamil, a guru with a strange connection to Kryštof's deceased sister. The emerging pandemic is changing life as he knows it, making the possibility of the world's end more real than ever. In fact, Kryštof might be headed towards a „personal apocalypse,” plagued by melancholy, the grotesque, intrusive memories, and dark forebodings. He becomes a hesitant actor in what might be a story of great revelation or of a cruel cosmic joke. Or, a tale of love.

Ondřej Štindl (b. 1966) is a renowned journalist who works as a columnist for the news site and daily paper Deník N. In his texts, like those of other members of the revolutionary generation, the starting points and legacy of the Velvet Revolution are an ever-present given. Reconciling with Czech post-war history also occupies his artistic work. Štindl has written two novels, *Mondschein* (Argo, 2012) and *To the Frontier* (Argo, 2016), and several screenplays, two of which received Czechia's most significant film award, the **Czech Lion**. In February 2020, he received the prestigious **Ferdinand Peroutka Award for the Journalist of the Year**. His latest novel, *So Much Ash* (Argo, 2022), won the Czech round of the European Union Prize for Literature.

The jury was impressed by his latest novel *So Much Ash*, which it described as being head and shoulders above mainstream contemporary Czech prose and having the potential to appeal to foreign readers too.

English summary

Ondřej Štindl's novel *So Much Ash* is set in Prague in the first half of 2020, during the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. It tells a fantastical story that thematizes the apocalypse as a symbol of extinction but also the promise of a

new beginning.

The book's protagonist, Kryštof Mráz, is filled with a new urgency in the time of the pandemic, both on a social and personal level. He is forced to ask himself some very difficult questions that he has pushed aside and ignored until now, to consider the meaning of life and perhaps even the existence of God, to try to come to terms with his own life and the losses he has suffered, to open himself up to the possibility of love, to stop living in a "lukewarm" way.

Kryštof Mráz is a middle-aged translator and writer who lives by himself. Shortly before the lockdown is announced, he attends a friend's funeral. In the pub after the ceremony, he bumps into his old girlfriend Martina, and she bitterly accuses him and his indifference of being the reason she got an abortion when she became pregnant with his child a quarter of a century ago. Kryštof is thrown off balance by the situation (and the alcohol), and in a fit of remorse and nostalgia he sets off to visit the family grave he hasn't been to in years. He finds it covered with flowers, which turn out to have been left there by a cult that worships Kryštof's long-dead sister Ivana.

That same evening, he attends a TV debate on an inconsequential cultural cause célèbre and, while in the studio, drunkenly argues with the intellectual Kristýna, who is a generation younger than him. The conflict ends in a debacle, with Kristýna unwittingly making a fool of herself, and the video of their argument goes viral. Kryštof attempts to get in touch with Kristýna, and although the gulf in their ages and views seems insurmountable, he is intent on seeking her out. When he does, she happens to be embroiled in an awkward situation—he manages to get her out of it and ends up walking her home.

He is then contacted by Kamil Rýdl, the leader of the cult that worships the deceased Ivana. He invites Kryštof to a gathering. There Kryštof learns that, according to Kamil, Ivana had prophetic dreams in which she saw the coming of a pandemic and the general destruction that would follow. At first Kryštof takes Kamil for a fraud. Then he learns from him that decades ago, when Kamil was a lost young junkie in Prague, he did actually know Ivana. On top of that, some details of the dreams his dead sister supposedly had begin to come true.

At the same time, Kryštof continues to grow closer to Kristýna and goes to visit her, walking through the ghostly, locked-down city, thinking of Ivana and blaming himself for not knowing exactly what his sister was going through when she was dying. In Kristýna, he sees a kind of substitute for the child he might once have had. Kristýna is ill, but Kryštof is unable to help her and is forced to take her to a psychiatric hospital.

He discovers that Kamil has a miraculous power. He lends it to Kryštof, who attempts to use it to help Kristýna. Kamil becomes convinced that he has been entrusted with the knowledge of the date on which Prague will face total destruction and he will meet his death—April 14. He locks himself in his house and Kryštof waits there with him. At the predetermined hour, they both go to a hill above the city and await the arrival of a great revelation. But nothing happens—by all indications, the city has managed to weather the pandemic without major losses (indeed, Covid-19 did not hit the Czech Republic hard until the autumn of 2020). It seems as though God is laughing in Kamil's face. The strange prophet dies according to his own prediction. When that happens, Kryštof experiences a curious form of ecstasy, a sense of transcendence and reunion. Knowing he has contracted Covid19, he makes his way to the hospital. He thinks of Kristýna and of the moment he saw his dead sister. The questions

that have been weighing on him remain unanswered, but Kryštof no longer minds. He is at peace and open to whatever is to come.

– Ondřej Štindl

Grants for publishing Czech literature abroad

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English sample

The boy stopped in mid-run and stared silently at Kryštof. He was breathing rapidly through his mouth and a line of snot dripped slowly from his nose. His mother was approaching along the path from the children's playground, chatting with a friend. The two well-groomed ladies in their thirties, wearing pastel-coloured jackets and matching face masks, were maintaining the prescribed distance. Prague was managing the pandemic in style – at least here in the centre, on Petřín Hill, where the locals had turned out in large numbers to enjoy the sunny spring day. Their joy at being outdoors and being able to talk to someone they knew clashed with a lingering sense of caution. Not only because of the fear of contagion, but perhaps also a concern that any undisciplined behaviour on their part would threaten the reputation of a country where the

citizens were resisting the pandemic in an exemplary fashion, in spite of their abhorrent government.

This bright, colourful scene was slightly marred by Kryštof, a man with a creased face, rumpled black clothes – he hadn't washed them for a long time and clearly wasn't using the right detergent – and sunken eyes. Just then those eyes were focused on the three-year-old child, who looked as if he was expecting something from Kryštof, though he had no idea what that could be. So he smiled at the boy, realizing at once that it wouldn't be visible through his face covering. He tended to feel awkward in the presence of small children, unable to drop the grown-up mask and make infantile noises with unfeigned joy. He would smile at them, that was true, but it wasn't the kind of reflexive smile that automatically appeared on other people's faces every time one of the little creatures laid eyes on them. Kryštof's smiles were deliberate and laboured; he had to organize them, send the relevant instruction through the nervous system for his mouth to stretch out in the appropriate way. And kids didn't really buy these forced displays of friendliness. The boy kept staring and Martina, who was sitting on the bench next to Kryštof, had to intervene. She shot Kryštof a look and rolled her eyes sardonically. Another useless bloke. Then she leaned over to the child and said something to him, reaching into her pocket for a cereal bar, the healthy kind with the nuts – of course it would be. The next moment the boy was running back to his mum, calling out to her loudly and enthusiastically. Martina sized Kryštof up once more in amusement.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing. I fancy a cigarette. But I don't want to take off my face mask with all these people around. There's always something."

Martina laughed, a little ruefully.

“You really haven’t changed.”

Kryštof liked hearing that – at a certain age, you’re glad to cling to an assurance like that. And he was also glad that Martina had come, that she hadn’t told him where to go when he’d blabbered incoherently to her on the phone after a sleepless night, and that they could sit next to each other on a bench on Petřín Hill like the ageing couple they hadn’t been for a long time but perhaps could have been. Two people who knew each other too well to put on a front but still got along anyway. The awareness that they hadn’t belonged to each other for a long time smoothed out all the rough edges. Signs of character traits or habits that would once have driven the other person to distraction had become a touching reminder of old and safely bygone times. They’d already been sitting there for over an hour and had told each other all sorts of things. A few snippets of gossip from Prague society, whose utter triviality seemed refreshing in these turbulent days, and they also discussed the health of mutual acquaintances and friends, a subject that grew in size and importance as time went on.

“Are you taking plenty of vitamins?”

“I’m guzzling them as if they were going out of fashion.”

She elbowed him, laughing.

“Hey, seriously. How are you holding up?”

“Yeah, all right. You know. Most of the time I’m cooped up in the flat, it’s getting to me a bit.”

He didn’t want to spoil the afternoon by talking about what was really on his mind. To disturb Martina with explanations about prophetic dreams, exorcisms and lost crutches, about a bloody streak on a white sleeve and graduates from Veselí nad Lužnicí. About the fact that he needed a bottle of booze to get to

sleep, and sometimes even that wasn't enough. That in the last few days he'd been scouring the internet for contact details for anyone in Prague by the name of Filipec, had found a few numbers and had been calling them one by one under a false pretext, trying to coax information out of strangers that they clearly didn't know, finding the whole thing incredibly awkward but keeping at it anyway, useless though it was. That from time to time he would surreptitiously peek out of the window to check whether there was a car parked in the street that he hadn't seen there before, and whether there were people sitting in it. He was grateful for the chance to spend some time in Martina's unshakeably practical world, where purpose didn't take the form of a rampaging, logic-defying force. Her version of purpose was something constantly and serenely present – instead of prophetic dreams, it manifested itself in ordinary concern. Concern for Evžen – he was on edge because he'd had to close the business due to the lockdown; at times all that sitting around put him in a foul mood and he started bossing the whole family about, just so he could feel he was in charge of something for a while. Concern for the children – their classes had been cancelled, but they were coping fine; their older daughter was no longer living with them anyway, she was renting a lovely flat with her friends on the embankment, can you imagine. And concern about her job – that was on hold, but Martina had her hands full as it was: she'd set up a neighbourhood group that distributed face masks to elderly people in the area and did their shopping for them so they didn't have to go out. She was on call this afternoon; she had to keep her phone handy in case somebody needed something.

“And of course you sew face masks too – I don't even have to ask.”

Kryštof's sarcasm didn't bother her in the slightest; he was never going to change. It would take more than that to shake her quiet confidence. This is a

war for the girls, he thought. It allows them to put their skills to use and show off how good they are at organizing and caring when they want to be. But it's more complicated for the men – they can't patrol the streets with a rifle, feeling responsible for everyone at home and ready to die for them. What are they supposed to do in a war like this one? Especially if you aren't a doctor and the main thing you can contribute to the general effort is your special talent for getting in the way. Then the only option you have left is to sit at home, tracking the numbers and concocting wild theories. Martina's phone rang and she quickly answered, pulling a pen out of her handbag and writing down an address on the edge of the newspaper. She ended the call and smiled at Kryštof.

"I have to go."

"Hold on a second."

Martina smiled at him again, a little impatiently this time. She didn't have time to shoot the breeze; other people were depending on her, and they were already waiting.

"I also wanted to see you because of what happened at Křemenáč's funeral. We didn't bump into each other again. And I've been doing a lot of thinking... Basically, you were right. I acted like a jerk back then. I dumped it all on you and washed my hands of it. I pushed you into taking the decision when my mind was already made up. I decided for you as well, I just didn't have the guts to say it to your face. I'm sorry."

Martina looked uncomfortable. Perhaps at a time like this, when she had everything nicely under control, she didn't like being reminded of a moment when she had lost control.

"It's water under the bridge, Kryštof. I'm not good with funerals and I shouldn't

have been drinking there and all of a sudden I just came out with it. I surprised myself too. Just forget it.”

Kryštof gazed at her blue-and-black face mask – it was strange not to see each other’s mouths when talking about a subject like this.

“So you’ve forgiven me?”

Martina got up from the bench and turned towards him, now visibly impatient and restless – she had work to do and he had to go and choose a moment like this to reopen old wounds.

“Forgiven you... I don’t know, Kryštof, if you can put it like that. It was a long time ago and a lot has happened since then. At the time I was really angry at you and now I’m not. Every once in a while something reminds me of it, that’s all. But most of the time – in fact, pretty much all of the time – I don’t even think about you or what happened between us. I don’t know if you can call that forgiveness. Time goes by and things get forgotten, they fade from my memory. Sometimes I regret that. And sometimes I don’t. I’m sorry, I really do have to go.”

They said a hasty goodbye and Martina set off down the hill to catch a tram. Kryštof watched her go, striding along with the brisk step of a woman who keeps herself in shape, a woman who urgently needs to be somewhere else, because despite the passage of time and the mercy of forgetting, there are moments when she needs to be as far away from Kryštof as possible. It was starting to turn cloudy and cool, and the park was slowly emptying. He could light up, it was safe now. He untied his face mask and pulled out a lighter and cigarettes, drawing in the smoke along with the crisp spring air. The light was fading and the cold was nipping at Kryštof, so he headed for home too. When

he got near the tram stop, he checked to make sure Martina was no longer standing there. He wouldn't have liked to have caught up with her, didn't want to hang around her like an unfair living reproach from days long past that would only have haunted her on the journey home.

In a convenience store he bought a bottle of red wine and some Irish whiskey – he might as well treat himself this evening. The man in front of him in the queue had opted for two bags of crisps and a load of beers. He'd clearly had a few already and spent a long time tipping out piles of change, while the shop assistant looked at Kryštof over his shoulder, sneering condescendingly. Kryštof shrugged indifferently – he wasn't going to encourage that kind of behaviour towards customers. As he looked at the stooped back in the threadbare puffa jacket by the till, the sparse strands of matted hair poking out from beneath the guy's hat, he felt a pang of kinship. He reminded him of all those drifters and small-time crooks in whose company he had spent many an evening before the revolution and thanks to whom he felt a little bit freer. He liked the thought that this kinship had endured through all those decades right up to the present day, when he could no longer stomach cheap booze, wouldn't work for below market rate and took a shower every day.

Back in the flat, he opened the windows, warmed up yesterday's soup, laid the table and put on a little melancholic jazz – vibraphone, brooding saxophone and light percussion. It was as if the flat was suddenly full of space, just the muted music rippling through the silence, the homeowner performing simple tasks, managing not to think about anything else, and his head feeling all the lighter for it. This was more or less how he used to picture his ideal set-up: a nice location, nothing too flashy or too reminiscent of a showroom for a sophisticated lifestyle, but it had his own stamp on it. He could decide when to be on his own

there and what music to put on; he would quietly hover around the kitchen, making a zen ritual out of loading the dishwasher.

He'd hold off a bit with the alcohol; first he'd sit down at the laptop and try to add a few more pages to his work in progress. For once he would forget about everything and everyone that these dislocated times had put in his path: the dead and the living, brothers and sisters, people and viruses. And he really did forget, consigning it all to the realm of absurd anecdotes to be brought out for a laugh when the company around the dinner table had begun to flag. But it still didn't do him any good. The evening was balmy, the jazz melancholic and the silence deep and conducive to concentration, and yet Kryštof still didn't write a thing. He couldn't concentrate; he kept straying from the text file to social media, deadening his imagination with streams of interchangeable opinions and reactions to them, even dishing out a few likes. It was as if the proximity of the computer forced him to emulate the machine, to adopt its perception, to become an impassive observer that only occasionally allowed himself to be roused to emotion, translating the world into a binary code of like-dislike. He gawked and wrote nothing, and it was partly the fault of the prose he was slogging away at, or at least pretending to. After all, it hadn't even managed to keep his attention, so why bother. When he'd started it, he had wanted to capture his vague sense of impending disaster, the horror at the fact that the end might be nigh, and also the childish and frightening urge to hasten that end. But his attempt had lost its *raison d'être*. What he had sensed coming was already happening; compared to the reality of the world and Kryštof's life, his laboriously constructed fantasies seemed artificial and inadequate. And in the end even the disaster out there was capable of disappointing. Although the country was locked down and ready to do battle, there weren't many infected, and as well as relief the news brought unacknowledged disappointment. They promised us a cataclysm, and yet again nothing came of it.

He abandoned his attempt and opened the wine. Once again, the booze wouldn't be a reward for a job well done: he would be drinking to drown his failures and insecurities. He settled down with the bottle on the balcony, letting the darkness surround him, and sipped slowly. There were a few treetops in sight, beyond them the street, now empty of cars. Just the occasional lone figure accompanied by an animal slowly walking along – people and their dogs, weary duos keeping to the rhythm of the call of nature and enjoying some fresh air in relative safety. Every now and again, the silence was broken by barking – it was like a village round here.

He would give Radek a call. Perhaps it was that down-and-out in the convenience store who'd brought him to mind. He was an ex-colleague from back in the day; most people on the editorial staff couldn't stand him, but he and Kryštof had got on well. It had been a long time since he'd spoken to him and it was safe to assume that Radek of all people wasn't doing too well right now: he had always lived from one paycheck to the next, and God knows whether he had any coming in at all now. It gave him a warm glow when he dialled the number – this evening even Kryštof would be useful to someone.

And Radek was genuinely pleased to hear from him. He immediately unleashed the torrent of speech characteristic of a nervous individual who has been on their own for a long time. There was no stopping him: he had an important message to share. He was convinced there was a sinister plot unfolding in the world, that the virus was just a pretext to enslave people. All those regulations and face masks on the street were designed to prepare us for it, to get us to accept the new reality and surrender our freedom voluntarily. But Radek was determined not to give in. Kryštof felt pity for him as he pictured his life, wondering what it was about it that his friend wanted so passionately to defend.

He immediately reproached himself for his arrogance. The gentleman in the nicely furnished flat is questioning the value of a person who hasn't got far in life, taking this as spurious proof of his own value. Radek had simply been unlucky, and on top of that he didn't fit in because he was too challenging for the world of so-called professionals and also had an exceptional talent for scuppering his own chances. But he really did talk a load of rubbish. This was what happened when you tried to banish insecurity for one evening, to forget about the frenzy that was coming to life in you and around you. Fate offered you someone else's paranoia for relaxation. Kryštof's balcony had ceased to be a quiet refuge; he felt as if his head was about to burst from Radek's incessant ranting. He didn't contradict any of it, sensing that the slightest hint of disagreement would only provoke another tirade from Radek. His mobile beeped twice; someone was trying to get through. He said as much to Radek, but he was unfazed, determined to make the very most of the opportunity to get all this off his chest. Each point of his crackbrained presentation concluded with the words: "Write about that. Write about that." Kryštof patiently tried to explain to him that it had been a long time since he'd worked for a newspaper or written for a magazine. But that didn't satisfy Radek. He sensed in Kryštof an unwillingness to step up at a time when everything was on the line, and perhaps also fear – of the powerful and their global plans. They had it all worked out to the last detail, the bastards. And Kryštof was a coward and was trying to wriggle out of it. He sensed that was how Radek saw him. He felt offended, but more than that he felt sorry about it: he had let someone down yet again, it always turned out that way. And it didn't matter that in this case it just meant he wasn't going to help him get his insane fantasies out into the world. Kryštof had enough insanity in his life as it was, and he wished they were just fantasies. There really was something happening to the world, there was no escaping that, even if you tried to for at least one evening. It didn't let up; it spoke to you – not

in Radek's words, but in the tone in which he said them, in the directionless anger at everything and everyone and the fearfulness that could be heard in them, in the waves of irritation that crashed over you as you sat on the balcony with a bottle of wine and a cigarette and someone was talking at you nineteen to the dozen and everything inside you was twitching.

"Hey, look, I've still got to finish a chapter today," he said, nipping another one of Radek's narratives in the bud. His friend on the other end sounded unconvinced; it was clear to him that he'd been right about Kryštof. Nevertheless, Radek's verbal motor slowed down and juddered to a goodbye and they wished each other all the best – that much, at least, was heartfelt. Out on the balcony, Kryštof breathed a sigh of relief; for a moment he relished the silence, but it had lost its healing power. He checked his mobile to see who had called him. An unknown number. Probably someone trying to sell him something – it would take more than a plague to stop those people. Who knows, maybe he had a rare opportunity to become a client of the Cordia insurance company, it could be his lucky day. He called back anyway – the curse of good manners. He let the phone ring for a long time and was on the verge of giving up when he heard a click and a weary female voice.

"It's me."

Kristýna. Kryštof greeted her and then said nothing else, waiting to see what this odd acquaintance of his would throw at him. However, the only sound that came from the device was her breathing and a vague crackling. Kryštof didn't rush her; he didn't feel like prising words out of her and didn't actually need to hear anything from her. He kept the mobile by his ear; even if she remained silent, it could be enough like this – just to maintain the connection. There was a

time when he had longed for a woman he could be silent with. It was a little late now to start pursuing that ideal. What's more, the girl of his dreams had been serene and composed; the silence between them would have eased Kryštof's turmoil. Kristýna had no serenity within her, nor did she transmit it to him. But this shared long-distance silence opened up something between them. Some kind of possibility that was remote when they spoke to one another, inciting each other to anger, frustration and recriminations. Perhaps this was the only way for them to be together: not seeing or hearing each other and yet somehow present beside one another. Kryštof lit up and slowly blew out the smoke; the night seemed calmer again. He refilled his glass. His mobile crackled.

"Sorry."

Kristýna's voice contained no trace of tipsy late-night sentimentality or rambling reflections on the advantages of being silent.

"It's all right, Kristýna. Did you need something?"

The breathing on the other end sounded a little louder.

"Should I come over?"

No response. Kryštof interpreted the silence as agreement, possibly encouragement.

"I'll be there in a little while."

Kryštof was surprised by his own decisiveness, the determination to head to her flat when he had already left there twice in a state of shock. It would turn out like that again – he wouldn't help Kristýna or himself. But Kryštof would risk it all the same; perhaps he needed his dose of horror and incomprehension because the shock made him feel more alive. That was all there was to it. Because Kristýna was never going to be the counterweight that would allow him to tip the scales of justice in his favour. She wouldn't enable him to rack up

good deeds so he would have them to hand for the day when his life would be weighed in the balance. And who was going to weigh it? Who would deliver the verdict? He'd just grab his things and go, he'd be there in no time. Because he wanted to peer into someone else's abyss, perhaps so as to feel better prepared for the moment when one would open up in front of him too. But there was another thing that might be spurring him on. An unspoken hope that what awaited him in the flat in Výtoň might be something other than abysses, wounds and an inability to communicate. Something he didn't know about yet. And he was going to chase after that hope. Abandoning it would mean giving up on life. Maybe it was as simple as that. He called a taxi and went out in front of the building, taking the bottle of whiskey with him. He opened it in the cab and took a big gulp while the driver eyed him suspiciously in the rear-view mirror. Relax, you don't have to worry about your seat covers. I've got some experience in this department, I've been around the block, I've got it under control. I've got everything under control. Kryštof half-closed his eyes as they sped along the empty road, the streetlights lining the route ahead of him merging into long fiery streaks.

This time she was waiting for him in the doorway, one hand resting casually on the frame and the other holding an open bottle. Her lipstick was smudged, and he was surprised by this seductively dishevelled look, but it suited her. He made to go past her into the flat; she held up her bottle and he raised his and they clinked. She laughed and Kryštof caught a distinct whiff of alcohol. He couldn't decide whether he should be alarmed or pleased about it. He headed into the kitchen; it was hard to see in there – the only light came from a lava lamp on the windowsill, and there was music blaring into the multicoloured gloom. Classic rock'n'roll in some neutered, old-fogey arrangement. The last thing he would have expected here.

“Does the music bother you?” she yelled at him from the doorway.

Call that music? He shrugged in a neutral way. But the expression on his face must have said it all, because she turned the abomination down to the level of an annoying whisper.

“I used to dance to this. Competitively.”

“Aha.”

“Aha what?” She looked him over in annoyance and took a swig. “Meaning that’s the kind of thing you’d expect from a girl from Veselí nad Lužnicí? I happened to like going to those competitions. I was only little. And I had lovely clear skin back then. Like a peach, my dad used to say. Daddy dearest. I almost won one of those competitions. It was a close-run thing, I’ll have you know.”

He could just see it now. The gym decked out for the occasion, little girls in wide skirts and grown-up-looking boys, all trying not to lose the beat or their professional fixed smiles as they performed their routines to this shit. Tense parents clapping along to the rhythm, smiling too, and perhaps silently hoping that their offspring’s competitors would meet with an unfortunate accident. Overseeing all of this were officials from the local rock’n’roll club, ladies and gentlemen devoted to their sport, who’d kept themselves fit, danced their way through life to get where they were today, behind the judges’ table, scorecards at the ready. How many points should I give, they pondered. And then they’d come to a decision and Mr Stejskal would be disappointed, but maybe this time he wouldn’t let it show – after all, the girl had done better than last time. After the contest, he would take her to the sweetshop on the square. A dietary lapse could be forgiven at a time like this – it would help to take away the bitter taste of defeat. Mr Stejskal.

“Kryštof, you’re not drinking.”

He quickly put that right. She laughed again, gently swaying in her chair, a strand of hair falling onto her forehead – the impression it made was almost languorous and relaxed. Almost. In her slow movements there was something defective, as if she had to keep that bright smile in place with all her might so it didn't slide off her face and wind up lying on the floor.

“Did something happen?”

She took her time answering.

“Not at all. Absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. Why do you ask?”

“You don't seem yourself.”

She rested her head on her hand in a deliberately exaggerated gesture of thinking.

“Not myself, eh? I'm not sure I can answer that for you, Mr Mráz. First you would have to define what being oneself means in my case. And only then could we begin to discuss whether I am or am not myself according to your criteria.”

What could he possibly say to that? That she would never be herself, because there was no “self” waiting to be discovered, buried beneath the layers of scholarly sounding bullshit, somewhere below the skin, if only one could cut through to it? Something purer than rock'n'roll contests and doctoral theses, the constant urge to please others – parents, friends, the exam committee, the editorial board – and the fear of not pleasing them, of being exposed. That she was supposed to wait for that “self” to pop out of its shell, take it to be inspected and get her rubber-stamped approval, wait for the others, those hordes of late developers, maybe even hurry them up a bit, so that then they could take to the streets together, rejoicing and happy with themselves for ever

more?

“Do you seriously want to get into a debate with me now? Is that what you dragged me halfway across the city for?”

“I didn’t have to drag you anywhere. You were actually quite proactive.”

He nodded in annoyance.

“I guess I was. So what?”

He stood up and opened the window.

“When you called me, you didn’t say anything. It was nice. I used to think I would be happy with a girl I could be silent with.”

He glanced outside; an ambulance was quietly crawling along the street with its lights on. Like an ice-cream van. It would play a merry tune when it pulled up at the lucky door. Come along, children, form a line, there’s plenty for everyone, don’t you worry.

“I’ll light up here if you don’t mind.”

He didn’t wait for an answer, and in any case Kristýna didn’t protest. In fact, she made no response at all, the shifting coloured light falling onto her face, a weary performer in the corner of the gym, cheeks like peaches, but that was of no use to her right now. She had to lay her young bones down somewhere off to the side, away from the children bouncing in the spotlight to a beat she always lost – perhaps only for an instant, a fraction of a second. But they would still notice, all those parents and judges. They had eagle eyes and watched fixedly, without even blinking. That’s what rock’n’roll meant to them.

He smiled at her, pulled himself up to the window and sat astride the sill. He rested his foot on a ledge further down the wall; it was fairly comfortable like that. He had done the same at home when Ivana had moved out and he

suddenly had the whole room to himself. He would sit in the window and puff away, half in and half out. Always just halfway. It was safe and anyway you felt freer like that; it was easy to imagine you were floating. They lived on a hill, and on the fourth floor too, and back then he used to feel as if he had the whole of Prague at his feet – especially at this time of night. Behind every one of those lights is a person – and what’s that to me, Mum? He tilted back his head and blew out the smoke, which drifted off towards the spires of the Emmaus Monastery. The sky above the city seemed crystal-clear – if the devil was abroad that night, Kryštof saw no sign of him, and he believed that at that moment he was invisible to him too. No matter how the devil swirled through the darkness, he would be carrying out the plan for the apocalypse in an all-consuming way. As for Kryštof, he was putting it on pause.

“Could I have a cigarette?”

She had brought over a chair and a saucer to use as an ashtray. There was a draught from outside and he shielded the flame with his hand as he lit it for her, the cigarette trembling slightly in her mouth. She quickly blew out the smoke and coughed a little, her cheeks flushing.

“I don’t do this kind of thing very often.”

“That’s pretty obvious. Can you pass me the bottle?”

She smiled.

“I meant I don’t make a habit of calling strangers up in the night.”

He took a long drink.

“Then I’m honoured that it happened to me.”

“Don’t take the mickey.”

He wasn’t.

“Sorry, I guess I’m not your ideal girl who doesn’t say anything.”

She took the bottle from him, her eyes glistening.

“You don’t owe me anything, Kristýna.”

“I know. And the same goes for you. I don’t really enjoy talking to you – sorry. But at least I have the impression you’re not going to write everything down as soon as we finish talking so you can use it against me when it suits you or when you feel like it. I don’t know if you understand what I mean.”

“I think so.”

“I’m not so sure. You’d have to have experienced something like that. My parents were always watching me. They often told me I should make up my own mind, do things my own way. And yet they never took their eyes off me. But they never said anything to me. They silently judged me and I didn’t know what for. I didn’t know what they considered right and wrong. They said nothing but remembered everything. Maybe they wrote it down and there’s a notebook hidden somewhere detailing all my shortcomings and failures. I wouldn’t be at all surprised. At home I never stopped feeling judged.”

This time she drank very deeply.

“I thought it would be better if I moved to Prague. I imagined how great it would be if one day I could lead the kind of life I have now. I mean, I’m doing academic work in my field, writing articles, living on my own and not tied to anyone. So I ought to be happy, at least a bit. Sure, the world’s doomed to destruction, but I could still allow myself that much. But no, it’s no use. It just takes the slightest thing. For my dad to call and for me to have to listen to his lectures for a little while. You’ve seen for yourself how it is with me. Do you have children, Mr Mráz?”

The question pained him.

“No, I don’t.”

“Good for you. Having children is the height of selfishness. Bringing them here. Exposing them to all of this.”

She took another drink. Kryštof was starting to get cold.

“I don’t know if you can look at it that way. My mum was born in the first year of the Protectorate. The Germans were winning on all fronts and my gran and grandad decided to bring a little girl into that thousand-year Reich of theirs. Or maybe they saw things differently. I’d say it’s a good thing that my mum came into this world.”

Kristýna was beginning to slump in her chair, her eyes becoming slightly unfocused.

“I suppose it is, Mr Mráz. Because otherwise you wouldn’t have been born. And this evening you came in pretty handy, that’s the honest truth.”

He clambered back into the kitchen through the window, closing it behind him.

“You came in pretty handy today too.”

Her eyes lit up.

“Yeah? OK, you know what? We’re going to smoke in here. Inside the flat.

We’re going to smoke the hell out of this place.”

She stumbled as she hauled the chair back to the table. She slammed the saucer with the cigarette butts down in the middle of it and smiled at him triumphantly.

“Get that lighter ready.”

He handed her another cigarette and lit it for her. She coughed again.

“Daddy won’t be happy.”

“He can’t see you.”

“You’d be amazed at the things he can see. You’re not smoking! Smoke.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Laughing, he lit another one.

“And turn off that godawful music.”

She made a face at him, reached for her mobile, and silence descended. They blew smoke at each other in the shifting light of the lava lamp, that beacon of irony that guides the traveller through the seas of informed debate. But right then Kryštof and Kristýna were riding a different wave. In silence they filled the kitchen with smoke and topped up their glasses; they were going at a fair old pace. He took one last swig – that would just about do it for today. She yawned, placing a hand demurely in front of her mouth.

“I’m getting sleepy.”

“So let’s go to bed.”

She looked at him questioningly.

“You want to stay the night?”

“If that’s all right.”

“The only space I’ve got for you is here on the sofa.”

“And that’s the very spot I’m looking forward to.”

This time they both laughed. Then they sat for a while longer, passing the bottle to each other and exchanging the odd remark – nothing important that needed to be committed to memory, it was enough just to recall the sound of a voice, the image of a face with its features softened by a puff of smoke, the feeling of weary calm and a slight tingling in your head. They drained the last of the bottle. Kristýna got up, leant against the table for a moment, then disappeared into the bathroom with tottering elegance. He sat down on the sofa and leaned against the wall; colourful reflections travelled slowly over the ceiling. He heard running water on the other side of the wall, the ticking of a clock above the door – nothing but peaceful, homely sounds.

“What do you like for breakfast?”

She was standing in the doorway in light blue pyjamas about two sizes too big

for her, with just the tips of her fingers peeking out of the sleeves.

“Coffee.”

“Is that all?”

“Coffee’s fine. At home I sit at the laptop with it and count the death toll.”

“I look at the statistics in the morning too.”

“We can check them out together, crunch the numbers, make sure it all adds up.”

She lowered her head.

“It’s not a joke.”

In her voice he heard anxiety – not just about the disease, but also about having a conversation that would sound totally inappropriate to her friends.

“I know it’s not a joke. And don’t worry, I’m not writing any of this down.”

She brought him a pillow and a blanket and said goodnight to him. Kryštof switched off the lamp, lay down on his back and stared at the ceiling. He could hear Kristýna getting into bed. She must have left the door open; Kryštof wasn’t going to close the kitchen door either. They weren’t doing it to express an unspoken invitation – come and find me if you like – but as a sign of trust. I don’t need to protect myself from you. If you hear me talking in my sleep, you won’t write the words down and use them against me. You won’t sneak into the kitchen with a knife in your hand once I’m lying here defenceless in my sleep. Perhaps they were closer like this than if they’d been lying next to each other. Kryštof huddled in the blanket, drawing his legs in so they didn’t stick out over the edge of the sofa. No-one would have fitted next to his large, ungainly body anyway. Except maybe a child. A tiny creature that would creep in during the night with bleary eyes and a soft toy in her hand, find a narrow space and burrow in beside him, breathing onto his skin and feeling completely safe because of it, wriggling in her sleep, dragging him out of bed as soon as it got

light outside. He might not have minded that. It was too late now to try and find out. His eyes soon grew heavy and he turned over carefully so as not to squash that little absence next to him, the long-ago possibility of someone who could have been here with him – now only as a memory, but one shared with a living person. These days his non-existent daughter might have been counting the death toll over morning coffee too. Would she have been glad if her dad had phoned? Would she have felt safer for a moment, reassured that the world – or at least the most familiar and self-evident part of it – was still turning and wanted to go on turning? Would she have tried to end the call quickly and yet found it did her no good because the ageing male voice on the receiver would unfailingly drag her back among the sad and angry ghosts of her childhood? Would she blame him for bringing her into the world, leaving him racked with fear that one day the girl would up and put an end to it all, letting her daddy know in an irrevocable manner that he could shove the gift of life where the sun don't shine? From the bedroom he could hear Kristýna's gentle snoring, which sounded to him like a fragile song heard for the first time. He tuned into it and the nagging thoughts disintegrated into a cluster of harmless sounds, and soon even that melted away.

In his dream he was walking into their old flat in Vinohrady, the familiar brown curtain behind the door. Kryštof got tangled up in it, the material rough against his face. He remembered that sensation, the scratchy feeling of home. Behind the curtain Ivana and his mum were sitting at the table, drinking tea; his mum asked if he'd like some too. Kryštof nodded and she poured some into a mug from the fancy set of china with the rice pattern. He sat at the table, saying nothing. He didn't understand when this was. Was he sitting here with the dead? Was this the moment of reunion, reconciliation and exaltation, the homecoming that might await a person in the hereafter? Do you go back to the

place where it all began – you left it so long ago and yet you were standing in the doorway the whole time, all you had to do was pull back the curtain? Neither Mum nor Ivana spoke, but there was nothing exalted about the silence around the table, no otherworldly revelation. Just an ordinary shared moment in the middle of a busy day. Every now and again they would look at him, perhaps waiting for him to say something, and at those moments Mum seemed worried – the boy’s awfully tight-lipped, what is he keeping from us now? Kryštof didn’t understand. What was going on? Perhaps this was just a glimpse into the distant past and he had travelled back in time a few decades. A man past his prime revisiting his childhood. He was confused by how old he felt there. He knew what was in store for the two women at the table; they had no idea yet, it was all still to come. You’re both going to die, Mum. Ivana quite soon and you a few years after her. That was how it was going to be. They didn’t know. Only Kryštof did. He’d dragged his worn-out old bones all the way here and he still couldn’t bring himself to tell them.

He got up and went into his childhood room; everything was in its place. The brass doorknob, the ugly carpet, a few posters, the tangled quilt. Someone must have got out of bed recently, perhaps it was me. The quilt sewn together from squares of blue and green fabric with a brown corduroy hem, his favourite. He had been taking an afternoon nap under it that day. He had skived off school and come back home to sleep off last night’s bender and was out like a light. He was jolted out of sleep by his mum shaking him and shouting something. He thought she was angry at him, afraid that Kryštof was shirking his responsibilities again. He stammered out some kind of drowsy excuse and it was only then that he noticed his mum was crying. She kept repeating: “Things are really bad with Ivana.” She was clinging to him, the only man of the house, but Kryštof didn’t know what to do, still half-asleep himself, he couldn’t process this

information. He wouldn't be able to for a long time. He wouldn't understand it even now, when he had fallen asleep in a stranger's flat at the beginning of a pandemic and in his dream he saw the crumpled quilt on the bed and he lay down and wrapped himself up in it, once again recognizing the touch and smell of it, and he closed his eyes and waited. He could hear rain outside, the drops drumming on the windowsill and falling onto his face as well, slowly, drip, drip, it was an old building and the roof leaked, the bucket in the attic must have overflowed, drip, drip. On the other side of the door, Ivana laughed at something, but it was a strange kind of laughter – was it even Ivana? Drip, drip. Kryštof woke up.

Drip, drip. He hadn't opened his eyes yet; he wiped his face with his hand. There was something there. Blinking, he saw the ceiling of Kristýna's kitchen in the darkness above him, the fridge humming behind his head. Even though Kryštof hadn't moved, the sofa creaked. He wasn't alone on it. Drip, drip. She was kneeling beside him, bending over his face – he couldn't make out hers in the darkness – and her right hand was raised. Kryštof fumbled blindly for the light switch. She didn't even blink when he turned on the lamp. She was wearing the pale blue pyjamas, good quality material, they must feel nice to sleep in, soft against the skin. Her own skin was a sickly white. Beneath it he could see the vein on her raised arm, stretching from the forearm to the wrist, above it the palm, the fingers – they were gripping something. Something that was causing a dark splatter on the pale blue pyjamas, as if she had been drinking greedily and spilt red wine over herself. She had cut her face with it, drip, drip. Slowly, she put it to her throat.

Kryštof leapt up and grabbed her by the wrist. She didn't make a sound, just started hitting him on the head with the other hand. She didn't even put much force into it, flailing at him like a petulant child. Someone wanted to take away

her favourite toy. She remained silent, just a low hiss escaping from between her lips. She didn't let go of the razor blade, blood running between her fingers. He grabbed her other hand too and pulled Kristýna down onto the couch, pinning her there on her back with the help of his knee. Her eyes were still fixed on him, she was breathing faster and louder, she struggled against him and something inside her wheezed so that she started coughing and jerking, but Kryštof didn't let go of her – he wasn't going to fall for that trick. Kristýna's gaze became more intense and her pupils darkened. Now she was no longer coughing, she was laughing; she raised her head up as high as she could and snapped at him, he heard the click of her jaws. She let her head fall back, slamming against the seat of the couch, laughing all the while. Finally she grew quiet, that fixed stare again. She shouted at him, mocking and furious.

“What are you waiting for, Daddy! Take me, Daddy! Surely you're not afraid!”
He wanted to make a run for it, dash out into the corridor in his underpants and shirt, wake up the neighbours and tell them they had a problem in the building. Please sort it out, it's nothing to do with me. Only it was. Kryštof continued to hold onto her thin wrists, which slid between his sweaty fingers.

“Go on, I dare you! I know you can do it!”

He pressed her left hand to the sofa with his knee to free up his hand and tried to wrest the razorblade from her right hand – it was no use, he cut himself in the process. He tried to loosen the grip of her fingers.

“You're hurting me, Daddy!”

He couldn't take it any longer.

“I'm not your daddy, so stop it. Just stop it!”

His voice cracked and he knelt on top of her, overcome with helplessness and terror. He just kept repeating: “Stop it. Stop it. Please.”

He felt her body go limp beneath him; Kristýna dropped the razorblade and the colour returned to her eyes. Kryštof picked up the sharp sliver of metal and got up from the couch. She started crying quietly; he should try to comfort her, but he couldn't bring himself to do it, to intrude upon her despair. It was too much for him. All of this was too much for him. Her sobs sounded childish: the little girl had had a horrible nightmare and was looking for someone to console her, but the only one around was Kryštof, a poor excuse for a father. Father. Daddy. A terrible word – he didn't want to hear it, didn't want to think it. Kristýna got up from the settee and shuffled over to the kitchen counter. She tried to wash the blood off her face, but her hand was shaking and the wound was too fresh and deep.

“Have you got any disinfectant?”

She headed into the bathroom and he followed her. He would try to be practical. Not to dwell on what they'd just been through – he wouldn't know how to talk about it anyway. By the fluorescent light in the bathroom he could make out a shallow cut on her neck. She probably would have done it too. She stepped towards the sink and turned on the tap.

“You can't stay here, Kristýna. I can't leave you alone here. You need a doctor.”

Her shoulders slumped. He could barely hear her.

“They'll keep me in.”

That sad resignation made his heart ache.

“That probably can't be helped.”

She turned off the tap and faced him; in the harsh light, the bloodstain on her pyjamas looked almost obscene.

“That’s never happened to me before – I mean that... I... I hurt myself sometimes, you know about that. I never wanted to go all the way. That’s not why you do it. But this was different. As if it wasn’t me, as if I wasn’t even alive and yet...you’re so alive when you cut yourself. It was as if someone else’s hand was guiding me and I was powerless to resist – it wasn’t even a matter of trying to. It was just about waiting to see what it would do to me. That hand was so cold. And so was I.”

Kamil Rýdlo’s words echoed in his head: “I hope you never have to find out for yourself what it’s like when the devil guides your hand, to feel that chill.” He could see Kamil’s smile as he uttered that sentence. What kind of smile was it? And whose smile was it? Kamil’s or the devil’s? Kamil bragged about knowing the devil, being able to subjugate him, command him. But who was really in command here? What kind of spirit was Kamil in league with? He stood beneath Ivana’s image and talked and talked – he could be spreading evil around him. And then people breathed it in and it attacked them from the inside and they transmitted it further, without necessarily being aware of it. And Kryštof had unwittingly brought that evil here, passed on this evil contagion to Kristýna. The evil was like a virus – all it wanted was to survive and spread, attacking its hosts one by one and ravaging them from within; it didn’t need a grand plan, that was enough for it. Kryštof shuddered. Something was happening to him too; there was something going round and round in his head. He had to stop it. He had meant to be practical. Rational. But he couldn’t stay here alone with Kristýna if he wanted to preserve his sanity. He couldn’t bear any more talk of a cold hand with the desire to kill. Just stop it. And don’t try to lay the blame on the devil. You shouldn’t have had so much to drink – she was already drunk when you got here, but that didn’t stop you. You should have hidden the bottle, realized it might not end well. It could all have been as simple as that.

“I’ll call an ambulance, Kristýna.”

She shook her head violently, tears welling up in her eyes.

“I don’t want them to come here for me. I know I have to go there. But not like that.”

Her voice was quiet and strained. In it Kryštof could hear a childish desire to preserve the semblance of normality for a little while longer, to take advantage of the last chance to act as a free and independent being before the moment inevitably came when Kristýna would have to give up this life of hers in her own flat on her own terms and join the ranks of patients. Her once lonely, scarred existence must suddenly have looked to her like a brightly coloured depiction of an ideal. Home. It was slipping through her fingers and she wanted to prolong the moment for as long as she could – every second counted, and it didn’t matter whether it was tinged with the painful awareness of finality.

“All right, I’ll order a cab. You should probably pack some things.”

“We can go to Bohnice, they know me there.”

She blushed as she said the word. Bohnice.

“I need to get changed.”

“I won’t look, but I’m not going to leave you alone.”

They went into the bedroom and Kristýna threw a few things into a sports bag. As she got changed by the light of a small lamp, Kryštof caught a momentary glimpse of her body reflected in the mirror. Embarrassed, he quickly lowered his eyes. Still, he had seen it and couldn’t erase it from his memory. All those scars, the old wounds on her side and upper arms, a meticulous ledger kept in blood, an account presented to the world. She quickly pulled on trousers and a sweater. Turning to him, she attempted a smile; again, he was moved. He felt like a guard who was to escort a prisoner to their execution. He had heard one

in a documentary talking about how he'd eventually quit that terrible job and now preferred bird-watching. That's exactly what I'd like to be doing right now: bird-watching. Ordinary seagulls on the embankment would do just fine. He would toss crumbs to them like he did when he was young and they would pluck them out of the air with utter assurance, calculating the elegant curves of their flight and transforming the supremely banal act of feeding into something beautiful.

Kristýna walked through the flat, checking that the taps and cooker were off, the windows closed. She was trying to be practical too, to play the character of Kristýna she was used to presenting to the world. To take a crumb of comfort from it at a time when she was losing herself. At least the condemned prisoner got a meal and a cigarette; they could talk to their family. But the only person Kristýna had by her side was him, a virtual stranger who was mostly disagreeable but at least wasn't taking notes about her. Kryštof hurriedly threw on the rest of his clothes. They were ready to leave, face masks on – hers was dark blue. Kryštof ordered a car. A black Renault. Four minutes. She was sobbing quietly as she locked the door behind them. They walked slowly down the stairs. The sound of footsteps carries differently when a person goes downstairs this late at night from someone else's place, when they set off for home with their adventures at an end, but to Kryštof that faint echo had a mocking ring to it. Kristýna was holding onto the railing, breathing deeply, bent over like an old woman in pain. He took her bag and held the door open for her, and she walked past him onto the pavement. None of the windows in the street were lit up.

"It's cold out here."

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