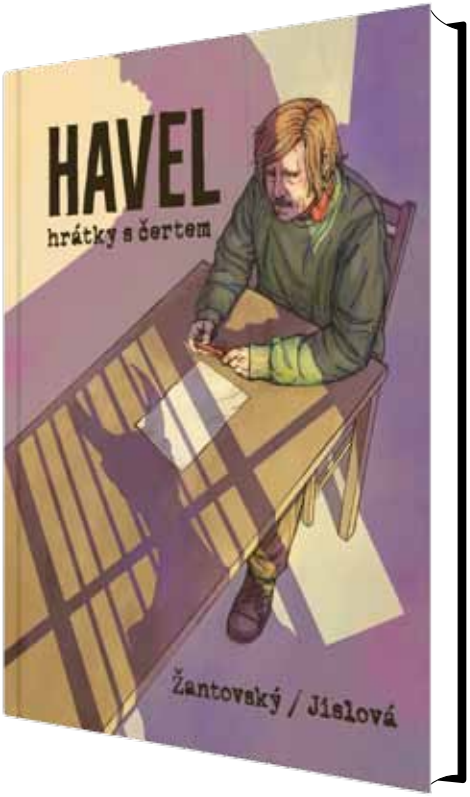
ARGO HIGHLIGHTS **GRAPHIC NOVEL**

Havel: Dancing with the Devil

by **Michael Žantovský** (script), **Štěpánka Jislová** (art)



An extraordinary story proving that true greatness and heroism arise from personal crisis and the courage to embrace one's destiny

A close friend of Václav Havel and an acclaimed comics artist present a graphic novel that fills a long-standing gap. The year 1977, when Charter 77 was published, marked one of the most dramatic periods in Havel's life. After several days of interrogations and house searches, the already renowned yet banned playwright was charged with subversion of the republic and damaging its interests abroad. He was placed in pre-trial detention and released only after four months. This episode provides the framework for a graphic microdrama in which the resolve of the future statesman is put to a severe test.

foto © Štěpánka Jislová

foto © Jan Křikava

Štěpánka Jislová (*1992) is a Czech illustrator and comics author. She studied at the Ladislav Sutnar Faculty of Design and Art at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen. With her comic *Strom* (*Tree*), she won the student competition CZ.KOMIKS in 2013. Her work has appeared in numerous Czech anthologies (*AARGH!*, *Caves*, *BubbleGun*, *XEROX*) as well as international collections (*Bobla*, *Dirty Diamonds*, *CBA*). She co-founded the Czech branch of Laydeez Do Comics, an organization dedicated to showcasing women creators in the field. She received the Muriel Award for her graphic novel *Srdcovka*. Beyond comics and illustration, she designs tattoos and clothing prints, sells her paintings, and gives lectures.

Michael Žantovský (*1949) studied psychology at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague and at McGill University in Montreal, later working as a clinical psychologist. He went on to become a translator (bringing into Czech works by Joseph Heller, Amos Oz, Norman Mailer, Tom Stoppard, and Woody Allen, among others), interpreter, journalist, and lyricist. He was a founding member of Civic Forum and served from 1990 to 1992 as Václav Havel's press secretary and advisor. He later held ambassadorships in the United States, Israel, and the United Kingdom. From 2015 to 2023 he was director of the Václav Havel Library, and he currently serves, among other roles, as a foreign policy advisor to President Petr Pavel. He is the author of the acclaimed biography *Havel: A Life* (2014) and other works.

Havel: hrátky s čertem November 2025 144 pages sample EN

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THE INTERNATIONAL PITCH

Havel: Dancing with the Devil

Michael Žantovský (script), Štěpánka Jislová (art)

Before he became president, he had to confront his own failure.

In January 1977, under Czechoslovakia's communist regime, the banned playwright Václav Havel is arrested after helping to launch Charter 77, an appeal for basic human rights. Alone in pre-trial detention, he comes under relentless pressure to buy his freedom with silence. He makes a concession that the regime will use against him. Release brings shame, self-doubt and a question more difficult than any interrogation: how can he go on defending responsibility when he believes he has failed his own ideals?

WHY THIS PERIOD MATTERS

The crisis of 1977 makes Havel's public ideals painfully personal. He has to confront fear and compromise in himself, then choose to act again. The years that follow bring renewed dissent, The Power of the Powerless and the prison letters to Olga. The book traces a crucial stage in the moral formation of the man who would later lead the Velvet Revolution: courage becomes a responsibility he must keep choosing, even after failure.

AN INTIMATE PORTRAIT OF A PUBLIC FIGURE

A close friend and biographer of Havel joins an acclaimed comics artist to make political history intimate. State surveillance and absurd interrogations unfold alongside memories, dreams and the Faustian figure of the devil. Olga's unsentimental loyalty gives this struggle its human anchor. The result is a concentrated drama about conscience, weakness and the cost of living by one's convictions.

PUBLICATION AND RIGHTS

Argo, November 2025; 144 pages. Rights sold: Taiwan (Acropolis).

View the current rights information

Includes three Czech review excerpts in English translation, a complete English synopsis, a condensed introduction and all 39 supplied English sample pages.

CZECH REVIEWS / SELECTED EXCERPTS / ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

Czech critical response

Three published reviews of Havel: Hrátky s čertem (Argo, 2025).

“Štěpánka Jislová drew the comic on a tablet and also shaped its storytelling superbly.”

Kateřina Kadlecová, Reflex

3 December 2025 / reflex.cz / Read the original review

“It would be hard to find an author better qualified to create this book.”

Kristýna Skalníková, Novinky.cz

9 December 2025 / novinky.cz / Read the original review

“Images of the dishevelled hero, bags under his eyes, teetering over an abyss of self-pity, are convincing and memorable.”

Kateřina Čopjaková, Seznam Zprávy

10 December 2025 / seznamzpravy.cz / Read the original review

FURTHER CRITICAL COVERAGE

Radim Kopáč, iDNES.cz, 18 December 2025

Read the original review (subscription required)

Short selected excerpts translated from Czech for this promotional material. The complete original reviews are linked above.

ENGLISH SYNOPSIS / 1 OF 2 / INCLUDES SPOILERS

A resolve put to the test

Prague, 1946. Ten-year-old Václav and his younger brother Ivan invent a Factory of Good, an imaginary enterprise whose product would be goodness itself. This childhood vision frames the adult Havel's struggle. It establishes the distance between a simple wish to do good and the costly, uncertain choices that goodness will demand of him.

By the mid-1970s, Havel is a well-known playwright whose work is banned at home. At Hrádeček, his country house, he and Olga gather friends from the world of dissent, including the actor Pavel Landovský. Their jokes, affairs and parties create a pocket of freedom under constant surveillance. Havel describes his new one-act play, Audience, as a story about beer and the secret police; outside the house, those same police monitor every visitor.

The arrest of underground musicians in 1976 gives Havel a reason to act beyond this private circle. He barely knows the musicians, but recognises that their prosecution threatens every artist's freedom. If music can be treated as a crime, a novel, a poem or a painting could be next. The trial of Ivan Jirous, Pavel Zajíček, Svatopluk Karásek and Vratislav Brabenec turns solidarity into an urgent moral obligation.

Out of this protest comes Charter 77, an appeal for the Czechoslovak government to honour its human-rights commitments. People with very different beliefs come together around that demand, and Havel becomes one of its first spokesmen. Delivering the document to the authorities leads to a grotesque car chase with the secret police. In January 1977, he is arrested and placed in pre-trial detention. His public stand now has an immediate personal cost.

Isolation and repeated interrogations wear down his resistance. The investigator takes on the features of Mephistopheles, making the promise of an easier life seem inseparable from a betrayal of conscience. Memories, dreams and the Faustian image of the devil turn political coercion into an inner drama. The central question becomes how long Havel can sustain the principles he has defended in public when fear and despair begin to overwhelm him.

In April 1977, he writes to the prosecutor, promising that, if released, he will refrain from activity that could be considered criminal and from public political statements. For Havel, the concession becomes a devastating failure of resolve. The book's turning point is reached: the man who called on the state to keep its promises must now confront the distance between his own ideals and what he has done under pressure.

ENGLISH SYNOPSIS / 2 OF 2 / INCLUDES SPOILERS

Responsibility after failure

Released in May 1977, Havel discovers that the authorities have used his letter for propaganda. The immediate relief of freedom gives way to remorse. He feels that he has disgraced both himself and the cause he represents, and tries to escape that feeling through drinking and parties. The state has found a weapon that can continue to wound him outside the prison walls: his own belief that he no longer deserves to speak for others.

Olga remains his anchor. Her loyalty is practical and unsentimental, and she refuses to treat his despair as the whole truth about him. She sees how the interrogator exploited his vulnerability. Their conversations give the political story an intimate centre: Havel has to face what happened without allowing shame to decide the rest of his life. The letter cannot be undone, but his next choice is still his own.

He returns to dissent and helps found the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS) in April 1978. Later that year, he writes The Power of the Powerless, dedicated to Jan Patočka, his fellow Charter 77 spokesman, who died in March 1977 after police interrogations. The essay explores living in truth under a system sustained by conformity and lies. In the book’s narrative, this work accompanies his renewed willingness to accept responsibility in public life.

That return carries a further price. Havel is arrested with other VONS members in May 1979 and sentenced that October to four and a half years in prison for subversion of the republic. His recovery is tested through action rather than declared complete. Having already experienced how imprisonment can weaken him, he chooses to continue defending others even as the regime takes away his freedom again.

The narrative closes with a letter to Olga from prison at Plzeň-Bory, five years after the crisis of 1977. Havel reflects on the difficulty of accepting his failures as truly his own, without shifting responsibility elsewhere. Such acceptance offers the possibility of a deeper understanding of himself and a more durable peace of mind. The final struggle with the devil is therefore also a struggle to recover authority over his own choices.

This is why the period matters to the portrait of Havel. It shows his moral authority taking shape through fear, compromise and renewed commitment. The future leader of the Velvet Revolution emerges here as someone who must learn to carry the memory of failure while continuing to act. The childhood Factory of Good acquires its adult meaning: doing good requires responsibility for imperfect actions in an imperfect world.

Historical chronology: Václav Havel Library

INTRODUCTION / CONDENSED EDITORIAL VERSION

The struggle within

Based on Michael Žantovský’s supplied introduction.

Dancing with the Devil unfolds in two connected worlds. One is communist Czechoslovakia during “normalization”: a machinery of repression and arbitrary power, a largely resigned public, and a small community sustained by friendship and solidarity. The other is Havel’s inner life, where the same pressures appear as fear, temptation and the possibility of surrender. The political conflict gains its force from what it asks of a vulnerable individual.

The legend of Faust gives this inner struggle its form. During his first imprisonment, Havel finds Thomas Mann’s Doctor Faustus in the prison library and records the image of a devil gripping him at night. Years later, the theme returns in his play Temptation. Here it gives visible shape to a question with a real personal cost: what happens when the offer of relief begins to sound like a reasonable excuse for abandoning one’s convictions?

Štěpánka Jislová makes that psychological conflict part of the action. Her drawings move between the material world of police surveillance, interrogation rooms and dissident households, and the protagonist’s memories, dreams and self-doubt. The graphic novel can therefore show both the regime’s pressure and the less visible damage it does to a person’s sense of himself.

The childhood Factory of Good supplies the story’s other frame. Václav and his brother Ivan imagine an enterprise devoted to producing goodness, an idea rooted in a family shaped by the humanistic ideals of the First Czechoslovak Republic. Adult life confronts that innocent ambition with difficult choices, imperfect conduct and consequences that cannot be wished away.

The crisis of 1977 and Havel’s return to dissent are crucial because they bring those ideals into the most demanding contact with experience. His later public role becomes easier to understand when we see the effort required to act again after falling short of his own standards. The book offers a close view of the responsibility behind his courage. In Žantovský’s reading, greatness is revealed through the way a person faces the obstacles life places in his path.

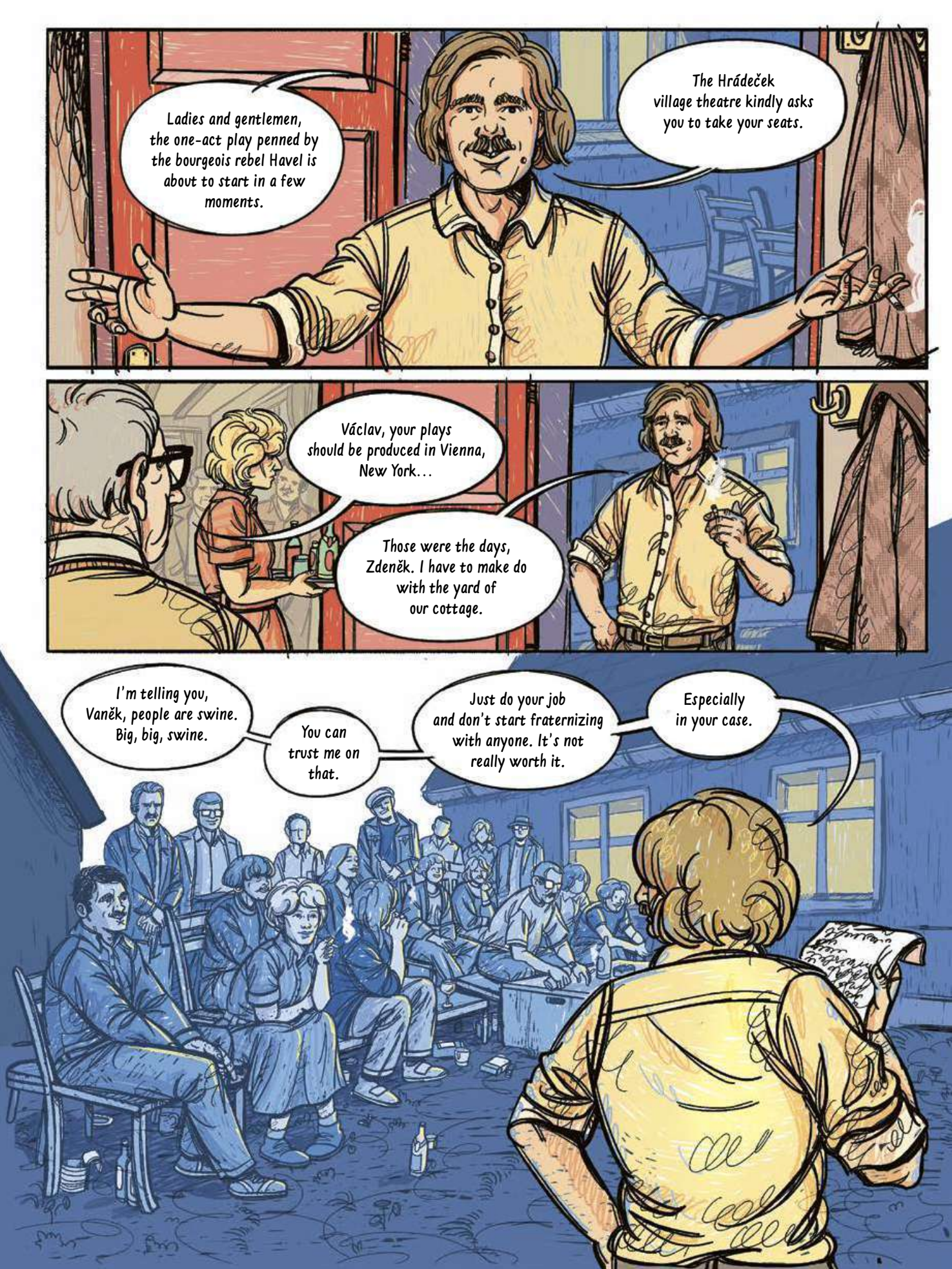
Editorial condensation prepared for this promotional material; this is not a verbatim text by Michael Žantovský.

Michael Žantovský
Štěpánka Jislová

HAVEL

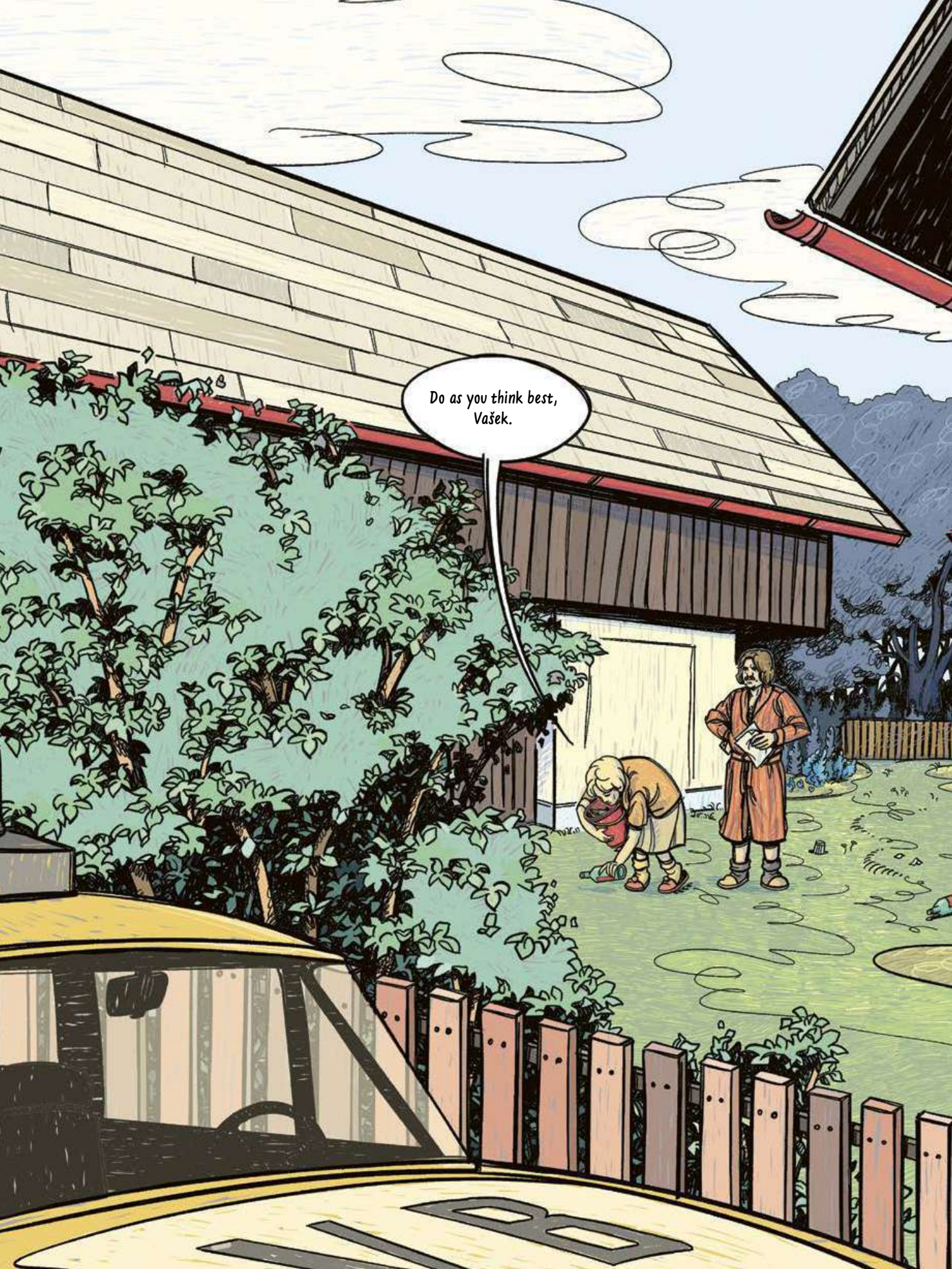
Dancing With The Devil

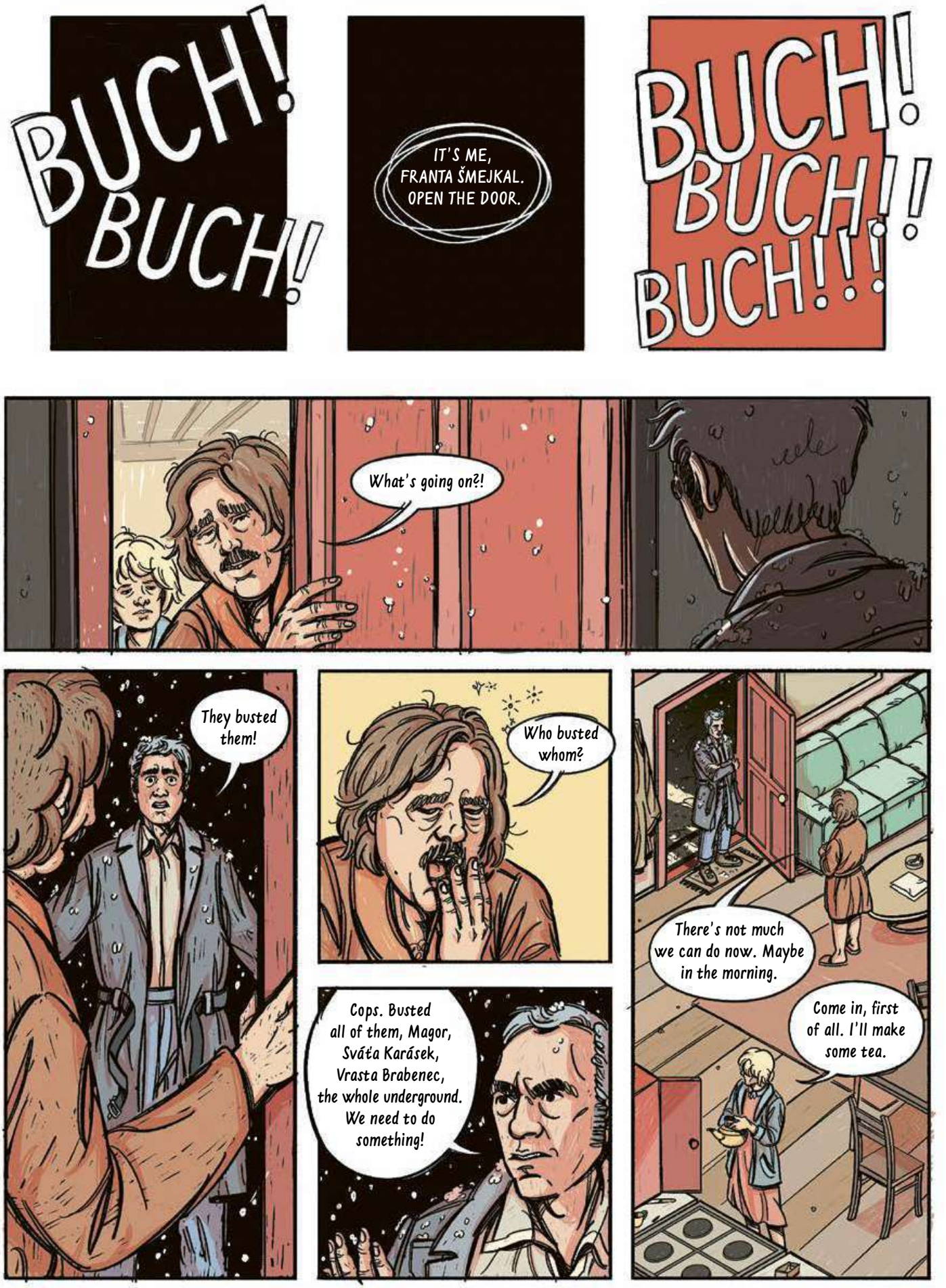
Argo

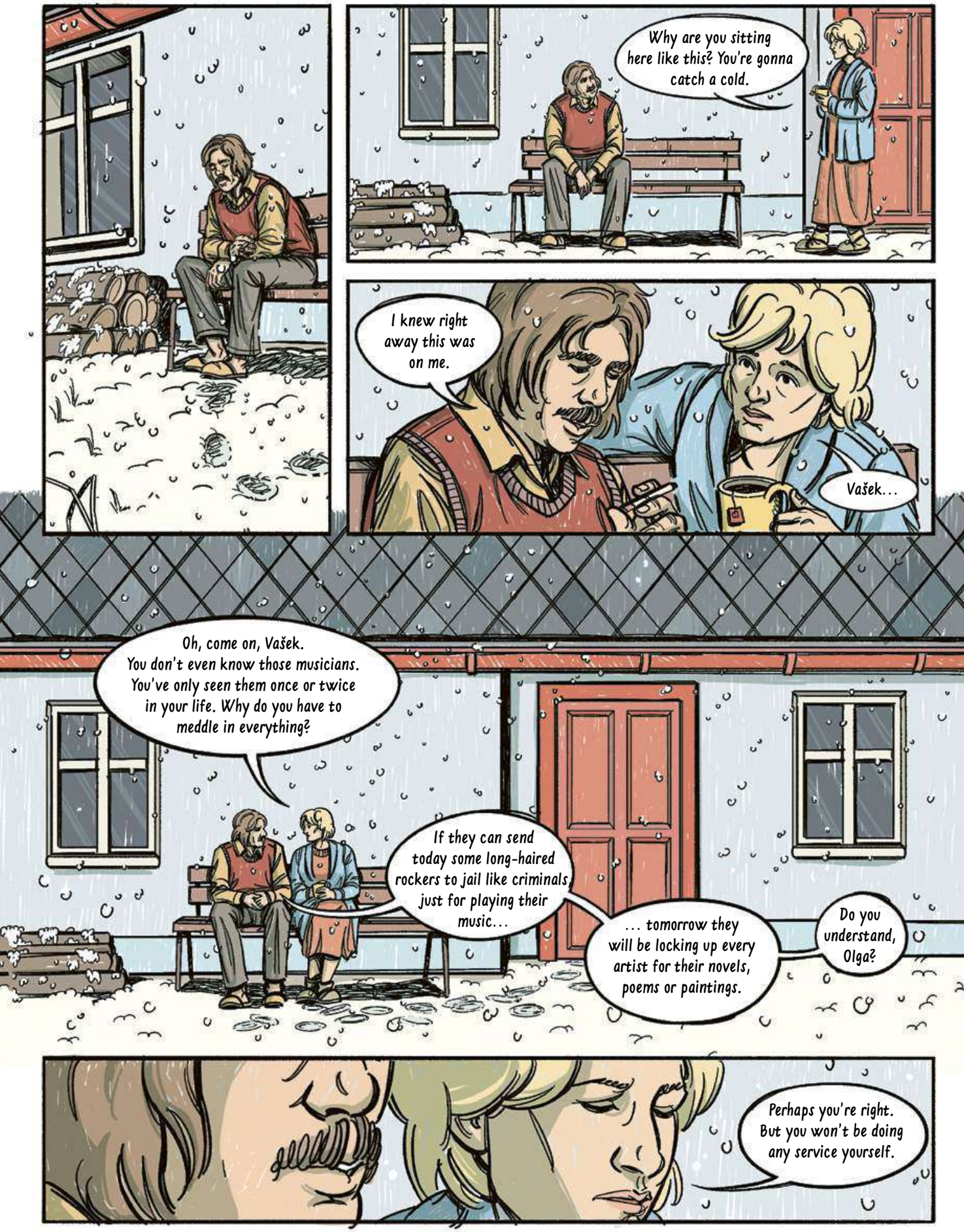

Ladies and gentlemen, the one-act play penned by the bourgeois rebel Havel is about to start in a few moments.
The Hrádeček village theatre kindly asks you to take your seats.
Václav, your plays should be produced in Vienna, New York...
Those were the days, Zdeněk. I have to make do with the yard of our cottage.
I'm telling you, Vaněk, people are swine. Big, big, swine.
You can trust me on that.
Just do your job and don't start fraternizing with anyone. It's not really worth it.
Especially in your case.

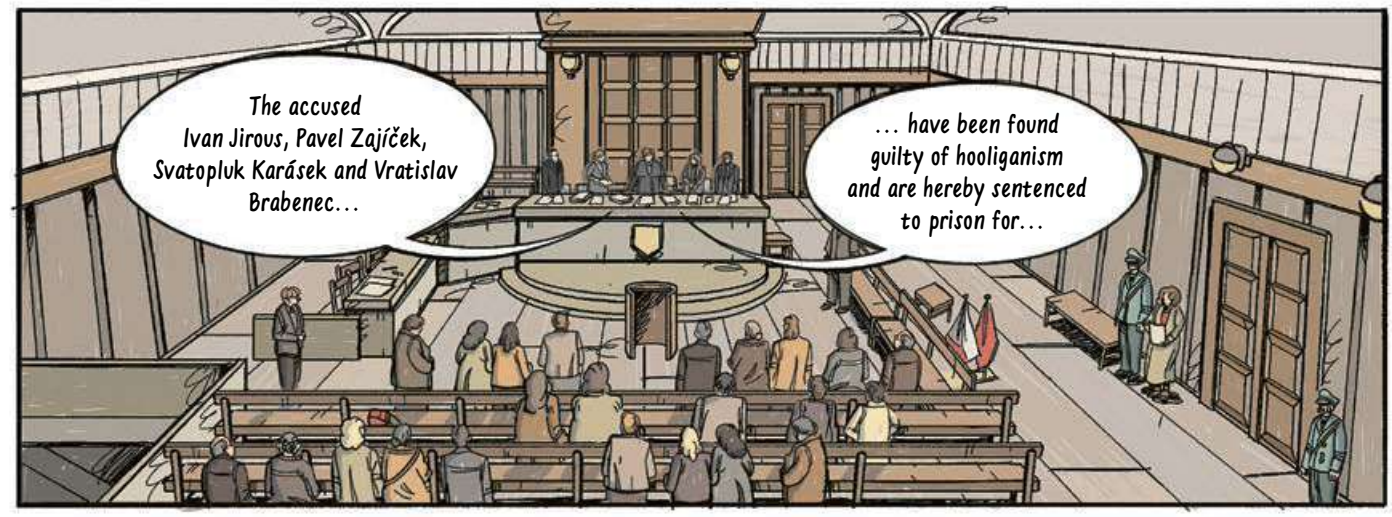
Dear Dr. Husák...
KLIK
KLIK
KLIK
KLIK
KLIK

Olga, I need you to read this.
...
This is a waste of time, Vašek.
Husák will never get to see this.
Someone has got to tell him that this "normal calm" of his is the calm of a morgue.
Or a grave.
... And if he gets to see it, he will never read it.
I want him to know that if they paralyze life, they will eventually paralyze themselves.
... And if he reads it, they will just lock you up.
But I have to do something, Olga. I can't live like this.
And it is all true.


Do as you think best, Vašek.


BUCH! BUCH!
IT'S ME, FRANTA ŠMEJKAL. OPEN THE DOOR.
BUCH! BUCH!! BUCH!!!
What's going on?!
They busted them!
Who busted whom?
Cops. Busted all of them, Magor, Sváťa Karásek, Vrasta Brabenec, the whole underground. We need to do something!
There's not much we can do now. Maybe in the morning.
Come in, first of all. I'll make some tea.


Why are you sitting here like this? You're gonna catch a cold.
I knew right away this was on me.
Vašek...
Oh, come on, Vašek. You don't even know those musicians. You've only seen them once or twice in your life. Why do you have to meddle in everything?
If they can send today some long-haired rockers to jail like criminals, just for playing their music...
... tomorrow they will be locking up every artist for their novels, poems or paintings.
Do you understand, Olga?
Perhaps you're right. But you won't be doing any service yourself.

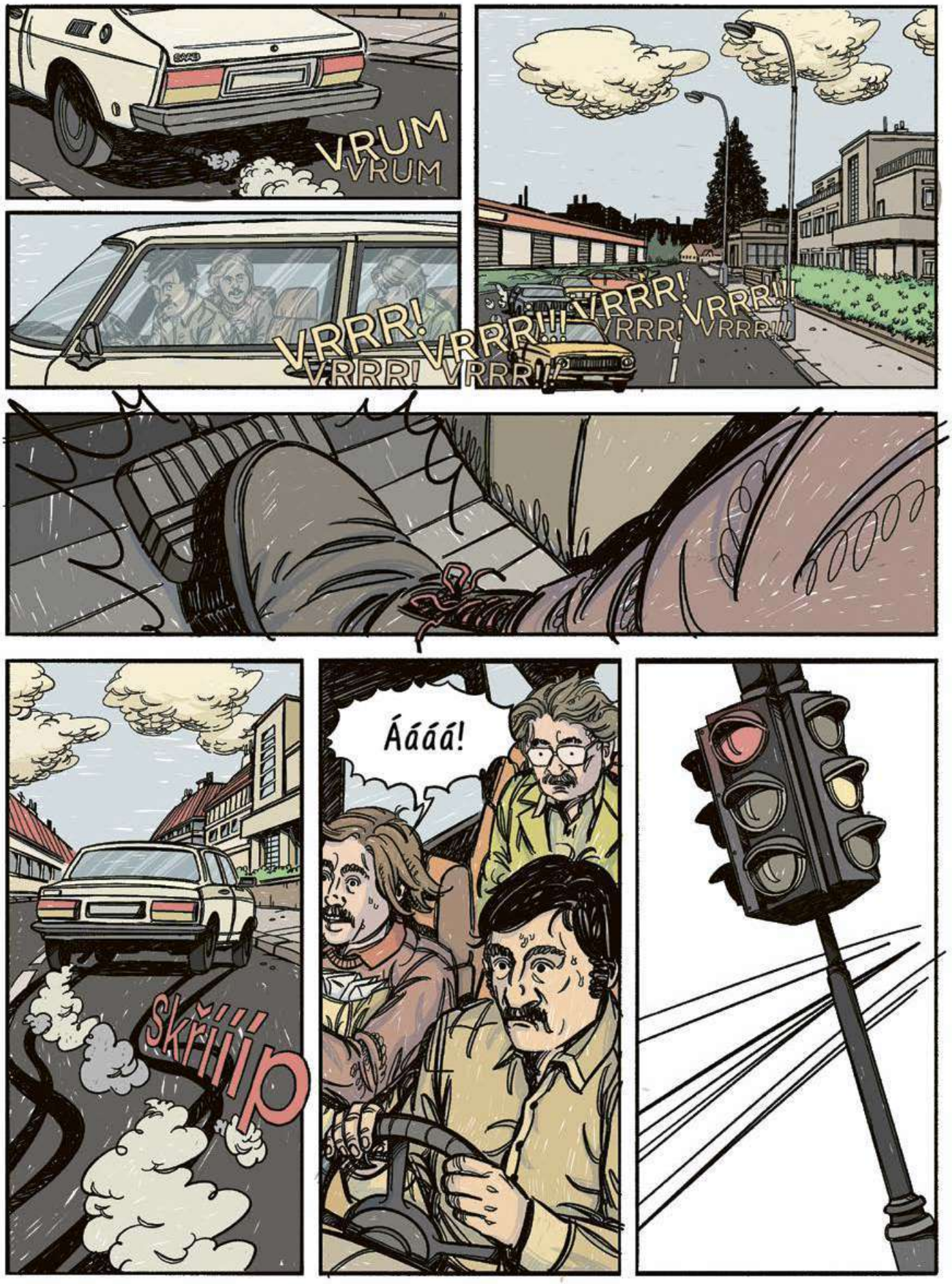

The accused Ivan Jirous, Pavel Zajíček, Svatopluk Karásek and Vratislav Brabenec...
... have been found guilty of hooliganism and are hereby sentenced to prison for...

Ivan Jirous, eighteen months
Pavel Zajíček, one year
Vratislav Brabenec and Svatopluk Karásek, eight months.

See, what good that petition of yours did for them.
At least we know who to count on. We need to meet as soon as possible.

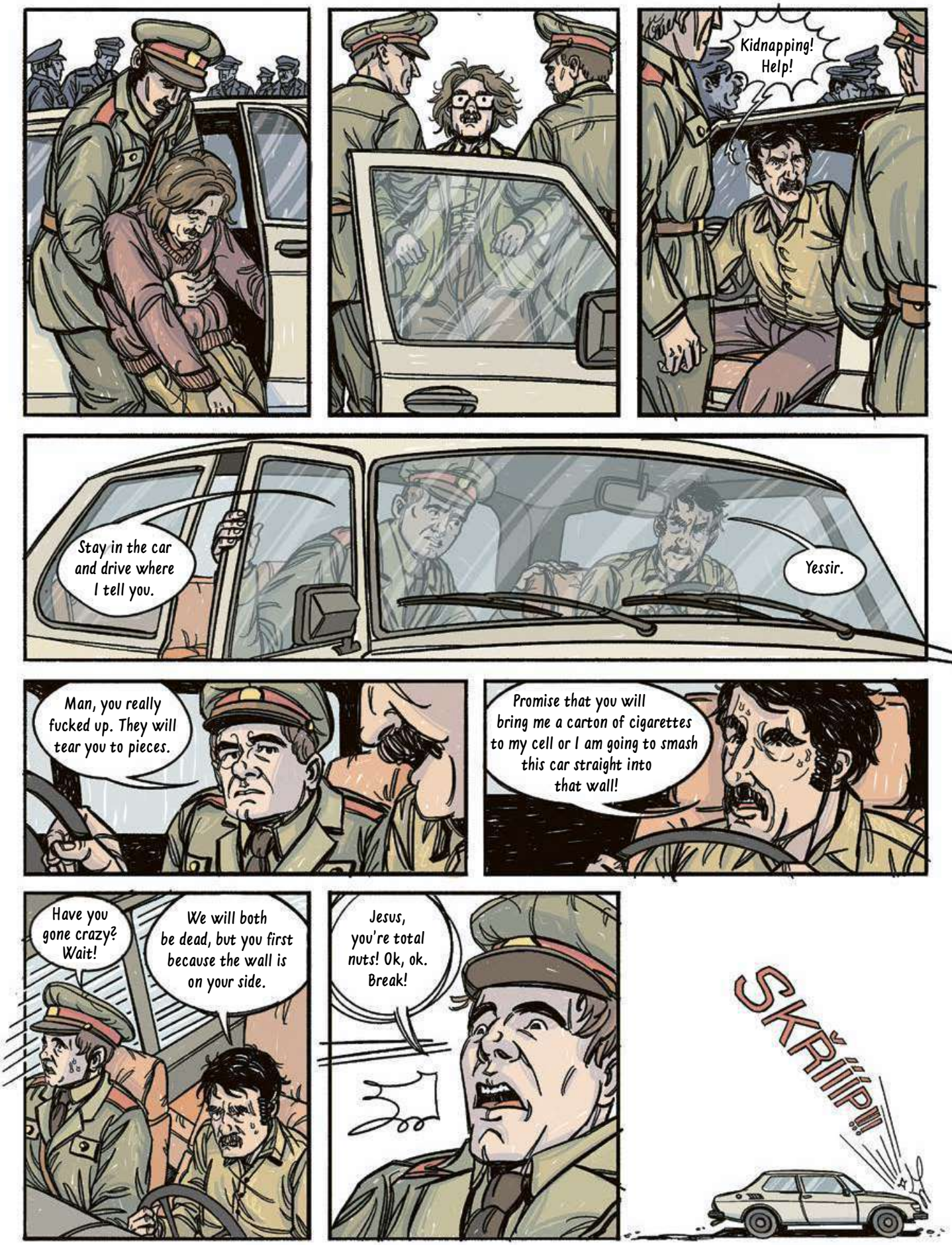
This is only the beginning.

Prohlasení
Charty 77
Gentlemen, I fear that we are asking for a shitload of trouble.
We're only asking the government to honor the respect for human rights, to which it has committed in the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.
Go try to explain it to them. Half of them don't know where Helsinki is.
Zdeněk is right. We are only using our right to petition the government...
... and also asking for a shitload of trouble.


VRUM
VRUM
VRRR!
VRRR!
VRRR!!!
VRRR!!!
VRRR!
VRRR!
VRRR!!!
VRRR!!!
Áááá!
skříííp

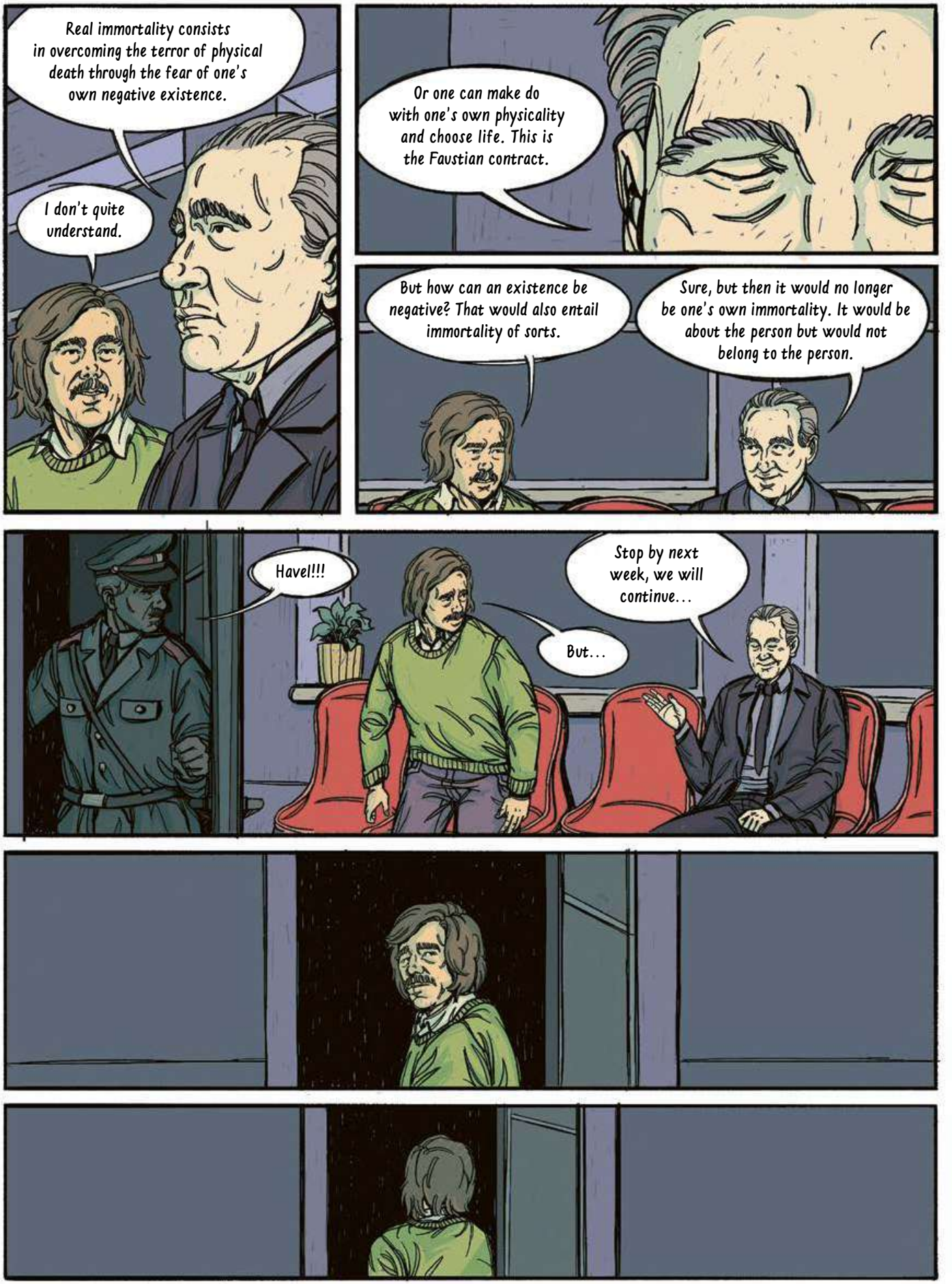
TŘÍSK!!
STOP THE CAR!
TŮŮŮ!
STEP ON IT!

Skříííp!
STEP OUT OF THE VEHICLE!
OUT! NOW!
This is a nice start of our struggle for human rights!
Give me the f...ing pigs and I'll stomp them to the ground!
Landák, open the door. The gentlemen look like they might really be the police.
I'll give them a few more moments to bruise their knuckles. Otherwise it would all go into our mugs.
Look, Landovský is shooting another movie.


Kidnapping! Help!
Stay in the car and drive where I tell you.
Yessir.
Man, you really fucked up. They will tear you to pieces.
Promise that you will bring me a carton of cigarettes to my cell or I am going to smash this car straight into that wall!
Have you gone crazy? Wait!
We will both be dead, but you first because the wall is on your side.
Jesus, you're total nuts! Ok, ok. Break!
SKŘÍÍÍP!!!

It is a human rights petition addressed to the government.
It is a counterrevolutionary pamphlet!!
Hey.
This is all they had. And under the counter, too. Sorry.

Mr. Havel...
No society can exist without a moral base...
Professor, appeals to justice will be hardly heard from this place...
A wrong does not cease to exist even when no one complains or is not able to complain.


Real immortality consists in overcoming the terror of physical death through the fear of one's own negative existence.
I don't quite understand.
Or one can make do with one's own physicality and choose life. This is the Faustian contract.
But how can an existence be negative? That would also entail immortality of sorts.
Sure, but then it would no longer be one's own immortality. It would be about the person but would not belong to the person.
Havel!!!
Stop by next week, we will continue...
But...

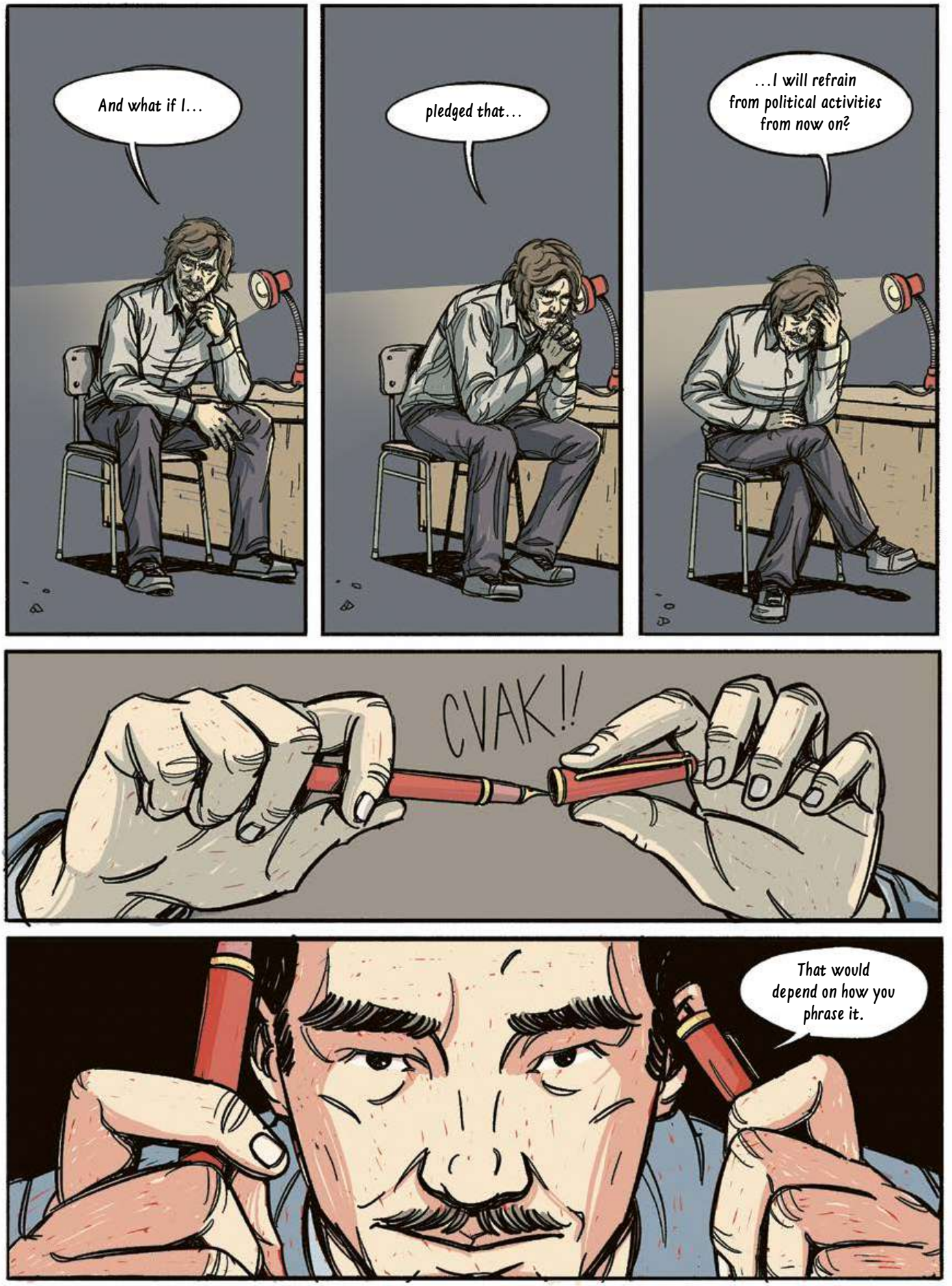
So Mr. Havel, no more fucking around...
Should I write it down?
How are you...

cink!
ARREST WARRANT
Congratulations, Comrade Major.
You are arrested for the crime of subversion.

March 77
What is it? When I see myself in the mirror, I look like a criminal.

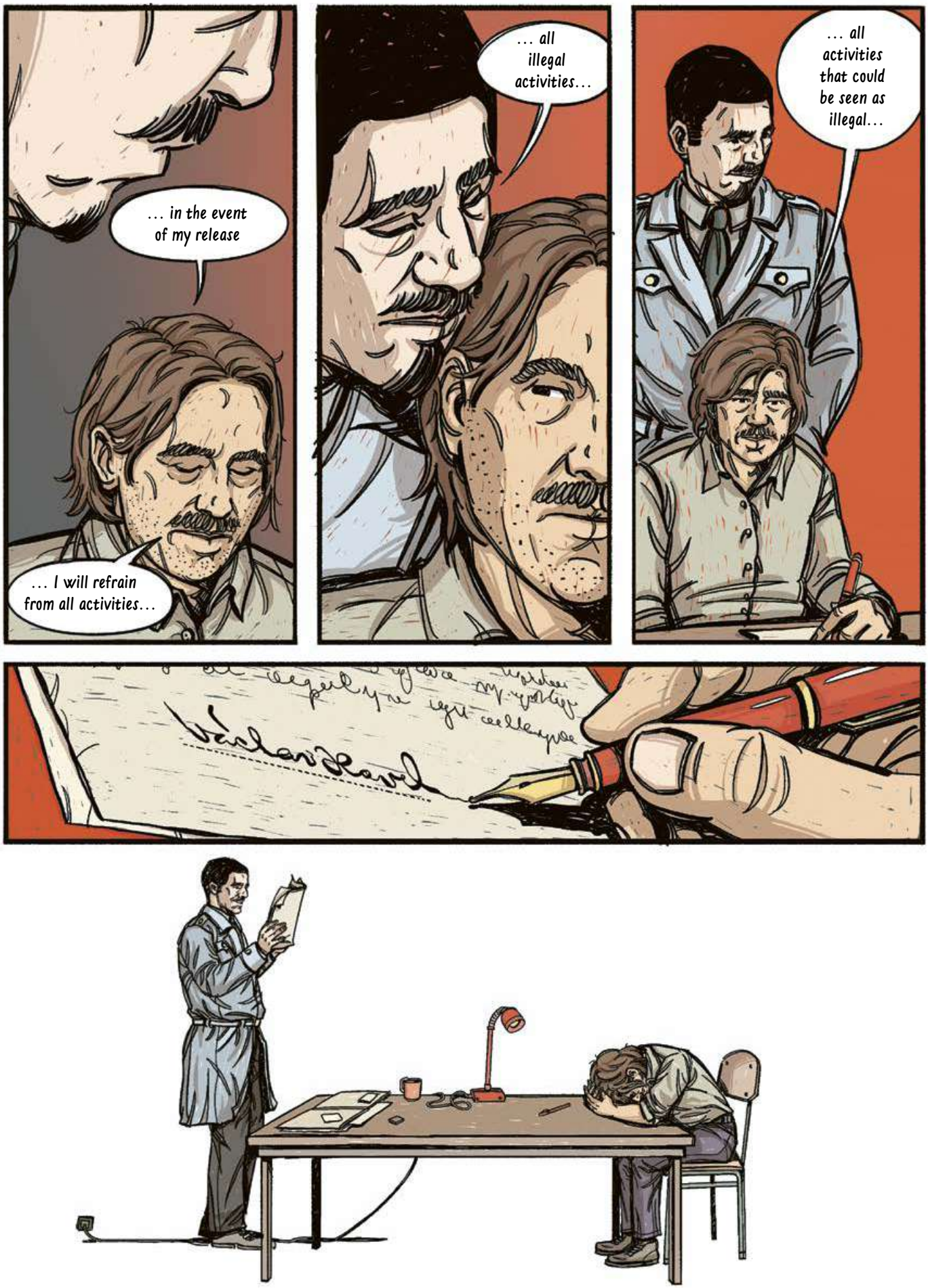
March 77.
No one gives a damn about me being here.
I'm left to rot.

It's no use. They have all recanted.
If that's true, you don't have to keep me here.
Hm...
Hm...
You would have to meet us halfway.


And what if I...
pledged that...
...I will refrain from political activities from now on?
CVAK!!
That would depend on how you phrase it.

April 5, 1977
At night... the devil gripped me.

Oh well...
Dear Mr. Prosecutor
Prosecutor general
Dear Mr. Prosecutor general...
I hereby offer a pledge...
...a binding pledge
...a binding pledge that


... in the event of my release
... I will refrain from all activities...
... all illegal activities...
... all activities that could be seen as illegal...

May 12, 1977
Dr. Faustus!
FAUST

And what about Olga?
What if she leaves me because of this?
I might as well put an end to it all...

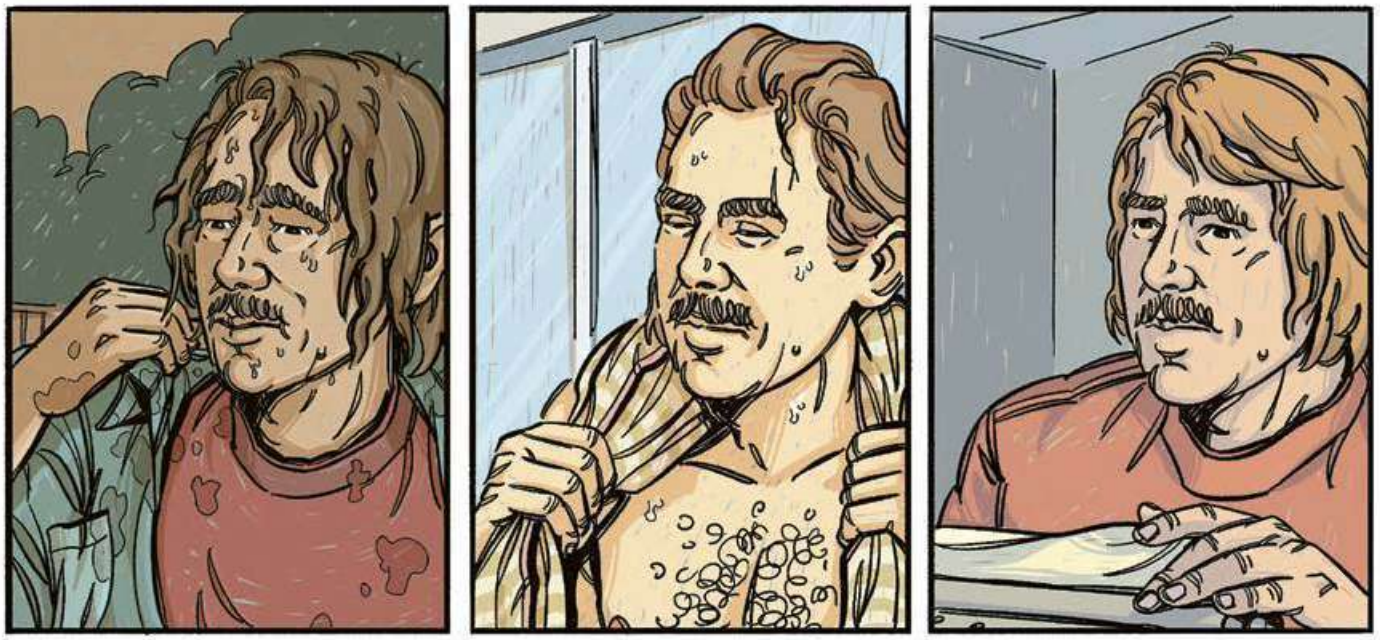
I would end it all if it was not exactly what they wanted.
If you could only hear yourself. Like a child. Like someone broke your toys.
And this idiotic politeness of mine...
Exactly. A spoiled child from a bourgeois family.
That's only to your credit.
And my arro...
... arro... gance.

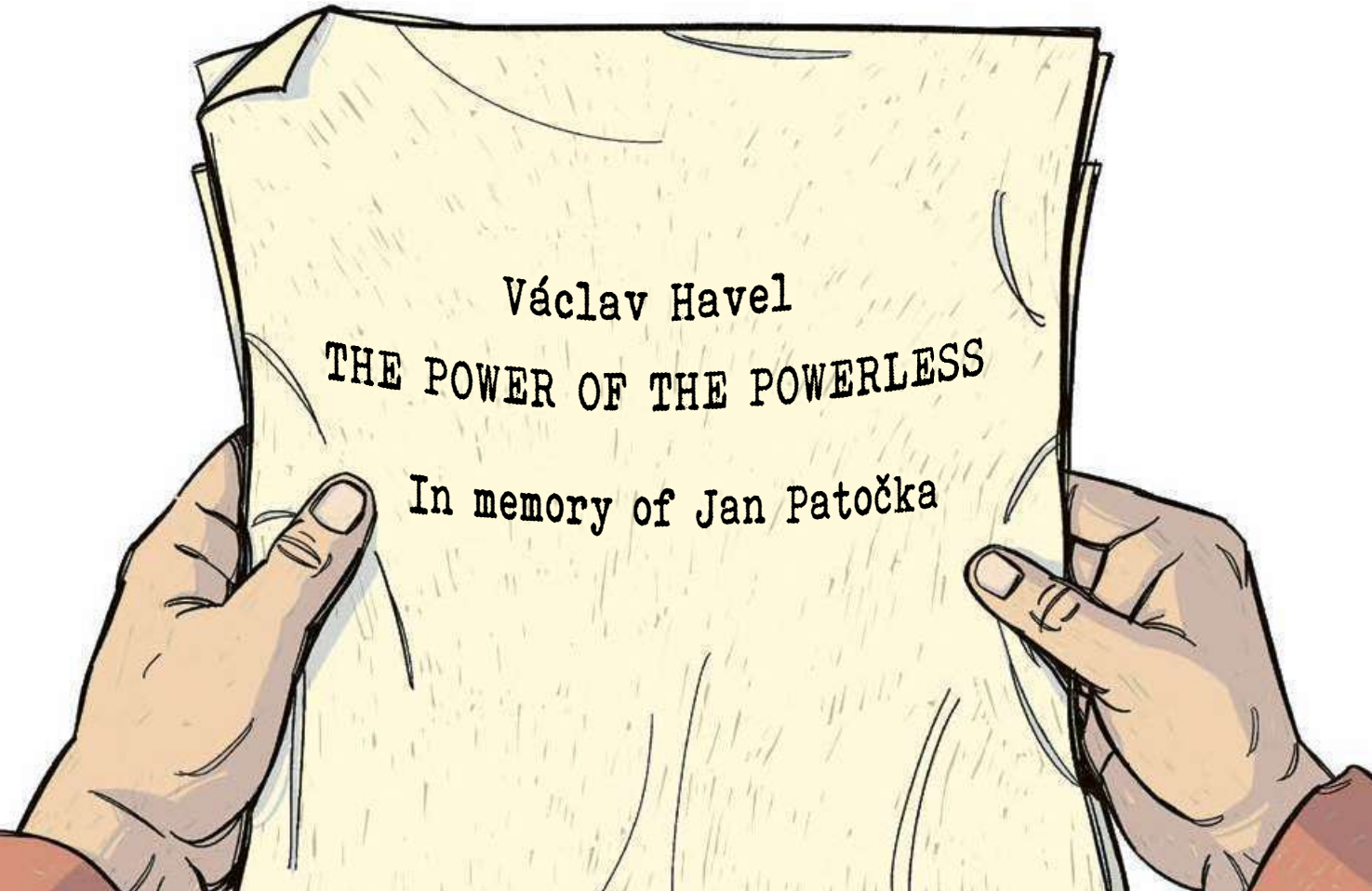
Life is beautiful.
Come on, Bohdan, mate...
We have to take a picture!

I LOVE YOU ALL!
CVAK!
ÁÁÁ
TŘISK!

Are you mad at me, Olga?
No, Vašek, but if you want to kill yourself, there are easier ways to do it.

CVAK!
CVAK!
CVAK!
CVAK!
CVAK!
CVAK!
CVAK!

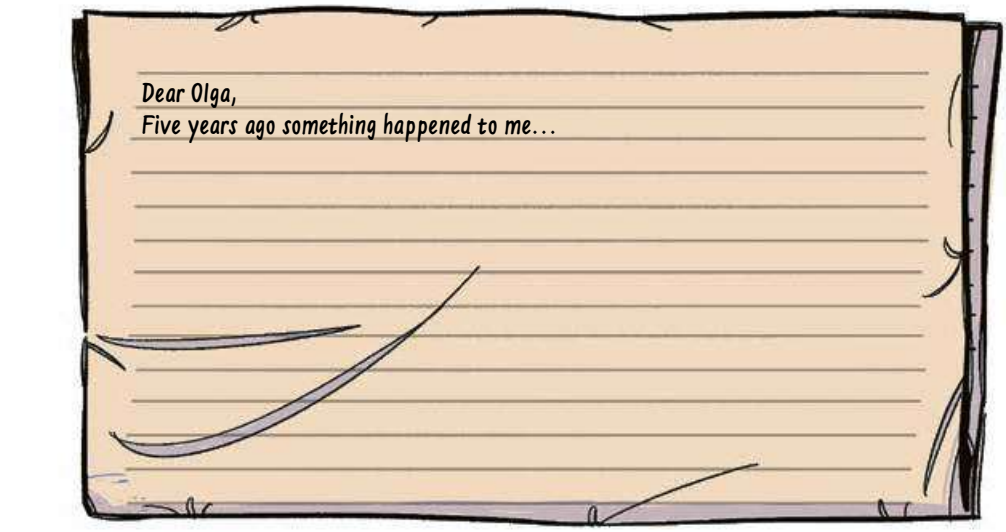


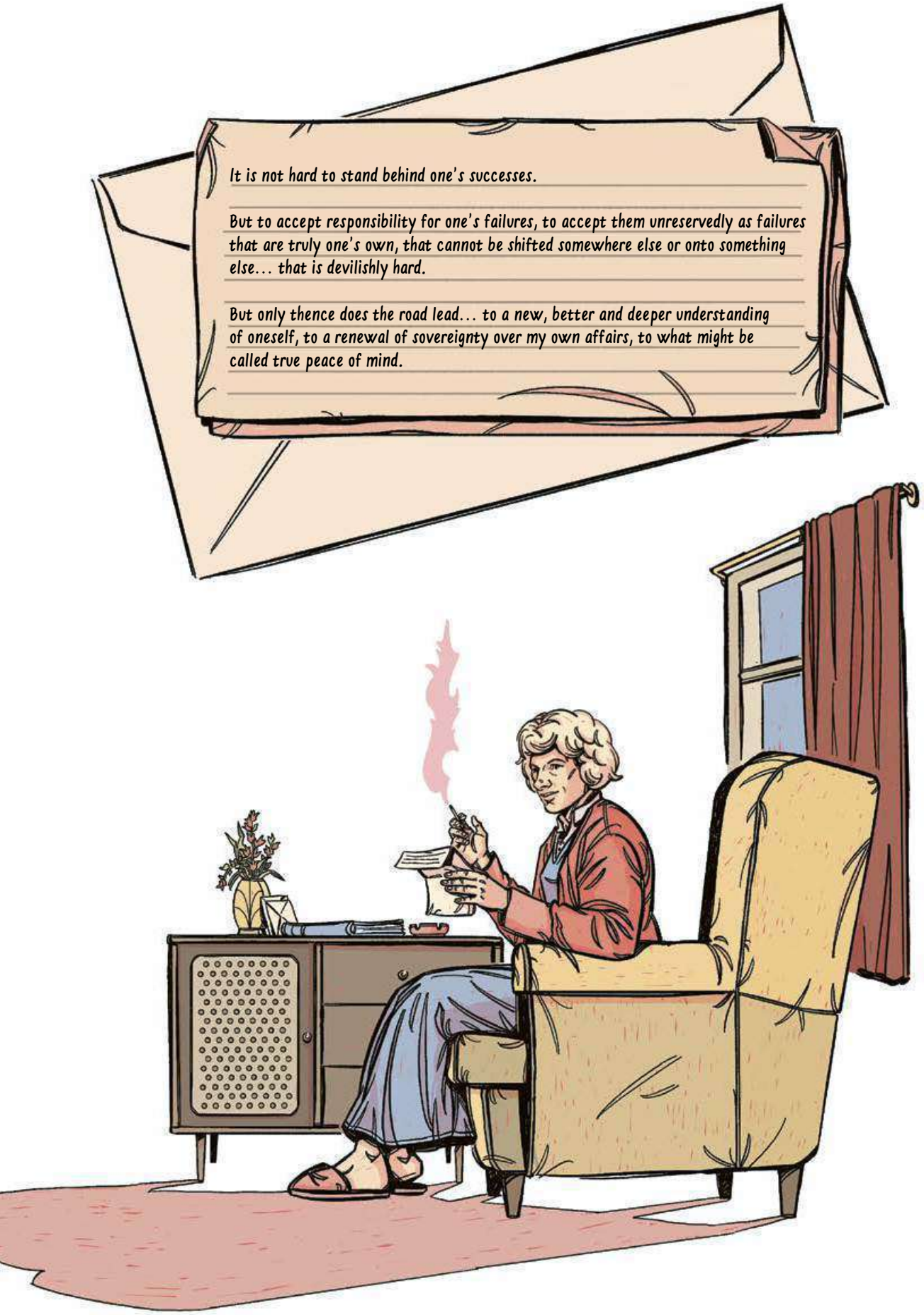

Václav Havel
THE POWER OF THE POWERLESS
In memory of Jan Patočka

Hm...
If I were you I would not worry about the power of the powerless.
The powerful will lock you up for this.
Do you really think so, Olga? And what would you do without me?
You don't have to worry about me. You do your own things and I do mine.
As always.
It is not so simple. I think of you even in prison.

ziiiv!!
SKRIIIP!
SKRIIIP!
CVAK!
You were asking for it, Mr. Havel.
You can have your wish.

In the criminal matter of subverting the state...
I have not committed any crime.
That is for me to decide.
The accused Václav Havel...
has been found guilty and sentenced...
to four and a half years in prison.


Dear Olga,
Five years ago something happened to me...


It is not hard to stand behind one's successes.
But to accept responsibility for one's failures, to accept them unreservedly as failures that are truly one's own, that cannot be shifted somewhere else or onto something else… that is devilishly hard.
But only thence does the road lead… to a new, better and deeper understanding of oneself, to a renewal of sovereignty over my own affairs, to what might be called true peace of mind.

Václav Havel