



Swing for the Heart Zdenek Hanka

Translated by Zuzana Wilcox, PhD.

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On the edge

"Come on in, Jenny. Do you have the summary?"

"It doesn't look too bad," she said, smiling already from the door. She was a friendly thirty-year old, always in a good mood. Her dark, carefully groomed hair down the shoulders made her look even younger, as did her constant smile.

When Ray hired Jenny some time ago, she was a bit apprehensive. He'd measured her with a wary gaze, and she knew right away that he wasn't someone to play games with. The stern, intent look, numbed her, but at the same time she found a sort of warm comfort in those eyes. When she got over her initial sense of panic, Jenny realized that his eyes were smiling and were actually full of goodness.

Worn out and tired in the face, Ray was perhaps sixty or more, she'd guessed. He got up from the desk – limping on one leg when he stepped towards her – and firmly shook her hand. He didn't indulge in chit-chat. He simply asked if she could work in database software, then about some other formal details, but all the while, Jenny felt as though he was watching her like a hawk. She almost left – he was a wall beyond which she couldn't see. Yet, the warmth about him prevented her from refusing the job. Just then, Ray uttered the simple sentence:

“You're hired, Jenny. If you'd like, you can start right now.”

They made a great team, and Jenny never regretted not turning away then. For several months now, she's enjoyed working for Ray.

It was a beautiful, sun-filled day in May 2002, when Ray turned his attention to a sheet of paper Jenny presented to him.

“Look at that, Jenny. That's your doing.” She blushed and felt proud.

“Oh no, Ray,” she knew this was her boss' way of motivating, she knew him well enough. Those who didn't know him may think him a rude old man. Yet he had the kind of compassionate kindness in him that only a few people possess.

“Ok, 'our' doing, if you like,” said Ray, raising his hand in anticipation of a 'high-five' as a sign of success. “April had turned out great. Look, here at St. Bernard's Hospital they ordered four valves from us – in March they only bought one – and General Hospital Sir Dowell wants seven of them. Jenny, that's excellent.”

“That's not all,” added Jenny, “take a look at the cardiostimulators. Primary Center wants twelve units. They're purchasing them all from us!”

“Fantastic work, Jenny.” Their joy was multiplied by the gorgeous day outside. “We took a leap forward, don't you think! I would like to go to the Conference in Vancouver and set up a small booth there. Eight by eight feet is enough. Find out how much rent would be; we probably have time. But let's wait on that a bit, I would rather have a small but well situated spot than a stadium-size lot that's out of view in the middle of nowhere. That'd be great. And when you have it, one more thing. Order a pizza for the two of us, and you decide what toppings you'd like.”

“I'm so happy, Ray.”

“That's exactly why we offered them those valves and cardiostimulators.” They were excited; it was an undeniable success. Jenny closed the door, on a mission to complete her tasks, and Ray took in the view of blossoming trees behind the window. He will go even further. But for that, he may need an expert. A consultant, perhaps, just for a short period. Hard to say. Or maybe Ray should take some courses himself.

In a few minutes, Jenny knocked on the door again and entered.

“It's not too steep, Ray,” said Jenny with notes in her hand, “and we have lots of time; exhibitors are holding off for now.”

Ray took the notes as Jenny explained her findings.

“Let's think about it, Jenny, it seems to me the best spot would be close to an exit from one of the auditoriums, maybe in the proximity of refreshments, wouldn't you agree? Definitely not right by the entrance. When people are on their way to a presentation, they're rushing and won't wish to be distracted. But when they're ready for a break – strolling for a bite to eat – they'll peruse our stand and ask us questions just to fill time.”

“What do you mean 'us' – you want to take me with you?”

“Why not? I wouldn’t buy anything from myself. A withered old man is not the same as Jenny. In fact, you should go by yourself. We can’t really afford two hotel-rooms yet, anyhow. You’ll see Vancouver, and, most importantly, you can make connections and meet representatives from hospitals.”

“But I’m not as much of an expert in the field as you are,” said Jenny, suddenly nervous about her new responsibility.

“It’s quite alright, we can fix that. You’ll need business cards,” reminded himself Ray, “now I will finally have them made for you.” Jenny resumed her note-taking.

“Wouldn’t it be better if you went instead?”

“It’s a done deal, Jenny,” said Ray, laughing, “I’d also like to break into the market with oxygenators for extra corporal circulation. Don’t be afraid of it. It’s only a matter of connecting with customers, and letting them sleep on it. Don’t be pushy, just let them believe it’s their decision. We’ll have time to discuss this a bit more. For now, make a note of this and we’ll return to it later. Write this down.” Jenny began jotting down notes that were still incomprehensible to her, as Ray dictated. “Plane, Neighbor, Last, Add, Exception, ,So nothing! factor.” Jenny wrote as Ray dictated, puzzled.

“...and then take a pill for the head,” she joked.

“...yes, sell that too,” retorted Ray, “now some kind of a clever slogan. Some catchy line. We’ll think about that. Now, however, it’s time for the pizza – let’s not forget about that.”

Defective ventricular septum

“Suction,” his open palm in a rubber glove awaiting forceps squeezing a piece of white gauze. He gently placed it in the pericardium and dried up a droplet of fresh blood. Again, and again. “...it’s somewhere here. Give me one more, Jitka.” The nurse set another forceps into his hand and Dr. Říha removed another droplet. “I see it now, it’s bleeding here...,” mumbling under his mask in a calm voice, “...give me a cautery.” Electro cautery hissed again, let out a faint smoke in the wound and the vein ceased bleeding.

“There, nothing’s bleeding in there anymore, said Říha to himself, making a mental ‘check’.

The respirator kept a steady rhythm, the clinking of instruments audible above the brightly lit surgical table reflecting in the glasses of everyone present. One of the nurses was monitoring the oxygenator.

“Can I speak to you,” asked quietly Dr. Janík, who was preparing for his postgraduate examination that spring of 1997, and was now completing his pre-examination practicum.

“That depends, how much you want to reveal about yourself to us.” The nurses knew Říha’s sense of humor well.

“What’s the boundary between an indicated suture and a patch?” Maybe Janík didn’t articulate his question too well, but Říha understood.

“With small defects of the septum,” he opened, as though in a lecture hall, “suture may be sufficient, but in this case it is a defect of moderate severity, and that requires a patch.” Říha was quiet for a moment, and so was young doctor Janík. Říha realized he hadn’t quite answered the question. He was focusing on the symmetrical application of the patch. “You have to keep in mind the resulting volume per minute and also the potential deformation in a more extensive suture.”

Piece by piece, Dr. Říha checked the patch he had just applied on the right side of the chamber's septum, mumbling something under his breath.

"Oxygen is at ninety-four, pH seven point thirty-seven," announced the anesthesiologist seated behind the young patient's head.

"That's quite alright. It will be plenty sufficient," replied Říha calmly.

He was everything a cardiologist should be. Composed, knowledgeable, experienced, with a steady hand, responsible but with a sense of humor, level-headed, and able to decide quickly and correctly. The illuminated operating room echoed with the sound of instruments, the hushed commands, and the heart pump. All that was left to do was renewing the heart's activity, and soon they could all talk about their plans for the near and distant future.

"Will you attend the conference, Dr. Říha?" asked surgical nurse Jitka.

"I prefer the other needle-holder; can you pass it to me? You mean Munich? I'm not sure if my car will be repaired by then. I'm still thinking about it." Říha paused for a moment and automatically, without having to ponder each stitch; he carried on finishing up his work. Ivana broke the awkward silence.

"And have you found out who's doing it to you?" Instead of answering, Říha shook his head, the operating room glistening in his glasses.

"How is the pressure, Ludva?"

"One-eighteen over sixty-six. Oxygen is now ninety-seven," answered the anesthesiologist.

"Would you like to finish closing, doctor?" said Říha, turning to the young physician preparing for his exams under Říha's supervision.

"If you've got any thread left, I'll gladly get right to it," joked Dr. Janík.

"If I had any left, I'd finish it myself. Continue, and I will be your assistant. It's now fully in your hands. As if I weren't here. You have Jitka and Ivana, but only if I permit it, doctor. Are we clear?" laughed Říha.

Dr. David Říha was a highly successful and skilled cardiologist. This fact was well known, and his reputation heralded success to anyone undergoing a surgery under his knife.

Dr. Janík's hands were visibly shaking. He tried to hide his nervousness, but everyone noticed. Jitka and Ivana looked at each other, then again at the wound.

"Stop," commanded Dr. Říha calmly, gently raising his hand to signal a pause. "I hear you play the piano quite well, doctor, is that right?"

"A little...."

"You play very well. You are a great pianist, dear friend!" Dr. Janík let out a bashful smile; the room was quiet, only the respirator kept breathing steadily.

"Thank you," whispered Dr. Janík.

"And now I want to see your hands on the keyboard. Show me, how you place your hands on the piano. You'll play. Ready?"

Janík lifted both his gloved hands above the chest, as though he was about to play Rachmaninoff. He stood motionless for a moment, and everyone could see that his hands were no longer quivering but were rock-solid.

"Needle, and let's get to it, doctor," said Říha calmly. Ivana and Jitka once again exchanged glances, visibly impressed. Now Janík proceeded successfully and with confidence. He sensed Říha was not his nemesis – an examiner waiting for an error – but a solid place of security that wouldn't fail him and is on his side. Because by not failing him, the patient wouldn't be failed

either.

Before too long, Říha called on Jitka: "I think the parents are outside. We are done here, so you can tell them that everything went according to plan and nothing surprised us. Let it beat now. Nature made it that way. Without a heart, a person can't live." He didn't like saying such clichés as 'the surgery was a success'. Only after a few weeks or even months can a procedure be called a 'success'.

"Yes, doctor," replied Jitka with her signature smile.

"Ivanka, you asked me earlier," continued Říha as he pulled down his rubber gloves with a smacking sound, "who's doing it, right? Can you untie my back? Thank you. But what good would it do me, if I knew?"

"Well, you could..."

"What? Go to the police and tell them that someone robbed my car and cut the wires for the third time? Or lurk behind the bumper?" His accumulated frustration was apparent in his voice.

"You think it's someone from the hospital?"

"I don't know, Ivanka. I really don't know. I'm trying not to think about it." Říha was shaking his head, staring at the ground, and Ivana felt sorry she re-opened the wound.

"I would like to help you, somehow. We all would." Říha looked at her for a moment, then nodded.

"Thank you. You're good people. Thank you. Please, when you get to post-op, we'll take new samples for the lab. I will need to test blood gases and minerals immediately."

"Yes, doctor," whispered Ivana.

At forty-three, David Říha accomplished more than most others. Excellent cardio-surgeon, coveted jazz musician and baritone saxophone player, and a well liked lecturer at the medical faculty with a gift to engage and motivate his students. On his bicycle he explored half of the country and only his closest friends knew about his charitable foundation for physically disabled children. At home, he always said: 'if I'm going to be celebrated on stage, then let it be for the saxophone, not the foundation'.

But the world knew even more about Říha. He'd started a small business, and in doing so, he'd separated from the crowd.

A profitable month

"Finally he's here!" Říha was welcoming Dr. Martinec exuberantly, "and where's your wife?"

"Are there none here?" inquired Martinec, pulling a bottle of Jack Daniels from his bag.

"I'll send you to a reform-school, Aleš," laughed Říha and the whole company with him.

"What would they want to 'reform' about me? Here, I brought Jack," giving him the bottle. "Šárka will be here any minute – she's talking on the phone outside."

"Jack Daniels is only the forerunner of your beautiful wife. Here she is," said Říha, turning towards the door, "we almost thought you went to another party instead."

"Hi, David, wow full house! I couldn't – and wouldn't want to – go anywhere else! I could hear you from three streets away; it's the only place to go."

Rowdy laughter roared from the kitchen. It was Stránský. He and Říha played in Dixiemed band together; he was also responsible for setting up the computer systems in Říha's Alternative Clinic. Stránský was surely the life of the party. The laughter coming from the small

kitchen drew inside Dr. Martinec and his wife, who were eager to catch the end of his story.

Stránský accompanied his anecdote with animated gestures:

“...he thought he’d take a small goofy-looking pill and suddenly he’d be twenty. Instead, it widened the blood vessels in the whole body, but not where he wanted it to. So the idiot took another one, his face turned red like a beet, swelled up, eyes bulging, but nothing else! All dressed up, perfumed, but nothing happened.”

“...it’s a good thing his head didn’t explode!”

“Almost. The best part is...,” everyone laughed so that Stránský had to yell over the crowd, “and the best part is...that’s not all, the best part is, that she got angry and left, and he got ready as soon as she slammed the door! And then he couldn’t get rid of it for several hours...”

Everyone had a blast. Říha’s Alternative Clinic had been in business for eight months now – the previous one being the first profitable one. That called for a celebration. Especially since new, even greater successes were likely on the horizon. The press had recently published an encouraging article, and now even a few celebrities found their way there.

“David,” it was Martinec’s turn to speak, “each one of us here would like to take a little bit of credit for the successful beginning of your clinic, its profit, and the fact that this June 1997 is the crucial, historical date. But we all know very well that it’s your hard work, and that your professional and economic victories are the fruits of your own determination...”

“...and you chose the prettiest nurses, you dog,” hollered Dr. Štěřba from his armchair.

Everyone was laughing, and Říha’s surprised eyes darted from one friend to another. ‘How many of them came?’ he wondered. Looking into their faces, David felt happy. But somehow, he sensed there was someone among the crowd whose shared joy was insincere. He couldn’t tell from their eyes.

Stránský spoke again.

“What you need to do is keep a few tricky, difficult to treat cases, and the profits will keep coming.” This time, the crowd cheered less, because they knew this was not Říha’s style.

“I would love to thank you, Dr. Říha, for...”

“Dear Janíček, hold on. You’re onboard, and I have a surprise for you. So save your thanks for now.”

“Well, now I don’t know. I just wanted to thank you for helping me with my exam preparations, and I want to wish you, from the bottom of my heart – especially for you it couldn’t be otherwise – great successes and a flow of new clients and patients, and for you to be able to cure them.”

“You’ve said it like a poet, and I know you mean it. I have three propositions for you.” The company fell silent as Říha continued, “first of all, I’m not so old that you couldn’t call me by my first name, and you’re a person I respect.” Dr. Janík blushed; he didn’t expect such praise, and certainly not in public.

Štěřba was sitting in the armchair, raised his glass, and strangely commented Říha’s suggestion: “...cheers for the adolescents!” A few people let out a smile. Říha moved passed the remark and continued.

“Well, I’m David.”

“I’m Jirka. It’s a pleasure, and thank you, David,” Janík smiled shyly.

“Jirka, dear Jirka. I would like you to read up everything about moxa treatment, and if you pass my arduous test and are interested, I would like to hire you into my rickety boat.”

“Yes...yes, of course...thank you, David. Yes, truly I will be happy to. It’s...thank you very much.” Everyone shared in this joy; perhaps some did not choose their words too well.

“The new graduate needs a shot,” announced Štěřba, leaning towards one of the nurses.

“And finally, I would like to ask our colleague, Jirka Janík, if he’d like to test the keyboards as a pianist in our band. What do you say?” Searching for Dr. Stránský, the clarinetist, David continued, “Franta, Franta, can you hear me?”

“Yes, and I’m delighted to hear it – it’s the best idea of the evening. I agree, you definitely need to join us, that is, if you can play even on a rocking steam-boat. Mind you, it’s no Steinway & Sons. We have a machine that has been through everything, it’s a piano that goes in and out of tune all by itself! You in?”

“Deal. Thank you so much. It’s all so overwhelming.”

“Well, get used to it, and let’s have a toast.”

The company once again resumed its festive mood, the only downside being that nobody had brought an instrument, to add to the jovial mood of them all.

Stránský once again had the floor, surrounded by four nurses.

“...of course. It’s the law over there! On a bicycle you have to have a three-point seatbelt, two straps connect with the pedals and the third one to the seat. And also self-releasing safety pedals and an orange vest or....”

Říha mingled with everyone, visitors interrupting their conversation only to congratulate David.

“...so they’re not using any sewing materials anymore, today everything is patched up with glue...David, your luck has turned! To be honest,” confessed anesthesiologist Dr. Ludvik Lukáš, who’d just arrived a few minutes earlier, “I wasn’t too sure about it at first. You know, herbs and music therapy, aromatherapy, homeopathy, I don’t know what all these tricks are called, today these are long-abandoned disciplines. Or so I thought. You convinced me, that they’re not, and that people seek you out. So, most importantly, I wish you that these folks don’t forget their wallets at home.”

“Ludva, thank you, I’m glad it’s working and that we’re really helping people. Believe me, I wouldn’t get involved with ‘tricks’ and the wallet sometimes gets left at home too. But it doesn’t matter in the least, for me it’s the interest in the patient’s problem. You know what I’m talking about, you’re the same, always trying to crack the mystery.”

“Well, say it, David, I’m a nerd,” smiled the anesthesiologist.

“Of course, a nerd, yes! But on the other hand, nobody can trip you up on anything in medicine. Maybe one day I would welcome you into my team too. As a member of our Alternative Clinic.”

“I can’t imagine myself as a sorcerer. But as they say – ‘Never say never’. So again, congratulations, David.”

David realized, especially during this celebratory soiree, that it wouldn’t be long before they needed a larger space. The dream was becoming a reality. Behind its fulfillment was relentless effort, will, losses and even a lack of understanding, endless papers and bureaucracy, thousands of permits and stamps and approval processes. Now he was standing here, surrounded by friends whom he invited to share in his joy.

The group dispersed around midnight. Everyone was in a boisterous mood and many had to resort to taxis, Říha following them into the night and looking over the parking lot in front of his

clinic. Happy and proud, he was returning inside, when he realized he hadn't had a chance to check his mailbox. David retrieved the thick stack of bills, pamphlets, journals and...was taken aback by an envelope. Written in red capital letters. The name was correct, address also, except that instead of his Doctor's title were written the words 'HIS OWN GRAVE-DIGGER'. Then followed his name.

Nobody around, everyone had left, his wife Alice was at home with little Kačenka and couldn't be at the party.

Slowly, David was opening the envelope, glad that in that moment he had no witness.

Fall 1997 – unwelcome attention

"David, are you even listening?" Only now did David notice that his wife was next to him, trying to contact him.

"Yes, Alice, yes. Did something happen?" he turned with a startled look that surprised her. David Říha did not look good. Sunken cheeks, restless, he was wary of every phone call. Alice backed away, realizing the change. Over the last few weeks her husband has been disappearing like a burning sheet of paper. She sat down on the edge of an armchair with a tea-towel in her hand and after a short pause she continued.

"Maybe that's what I should ask you. David, are you sick?" He looked at her like a beat dog and only shook his head. Then he willed himself to smile, to calm Alice down a bit. She doesn't need to know everything. She always gets frightened, and can't help anyway.

"I think I'm just a little tired. That's all. What's for dinner?" She stared at him with astonishment, as though he was turning into smoke.

"David, it's ten in the morning. It's Sunday. Today is Sunday. It's morning." She spoke quietly and slowly.

"I know, yes, I know, Alice. I'm just asking." He smiled awkwardly and Alice didn't ask any more questions. She knew that something was wrong. She went into the kitchen and began putting dishes into cupboards. But she couldn't help it. Quietly she started towards the living room and peeked inside. David was kneeling next to his desk and was organizing some papers in the bottom drawer. Alice watched him for a bit and tried to guess which documents he was sorting. It was evident David was concentrating on his work and was completely cut off from the world around him. Alice made one, then another step into the room and saw a little better what her husband was holding. They were letters. She wanted to know more, but the floor creaked under her bare foot and David jumped up and turned with a scream. The letters fell out of his hands and he began to collect them quickly. In a split second Alice realized that if she demanded to see them right away, she may not be successful. She'd let him throw them into the bottom drawer, listening to him mumble something about bills. But she'll get to them.

"Would you like some coffee, David?"

"Coffee? Yes, actually, no, maybe yes. Yes, I would like one, thank you, Alice." She returned to the kitchen, to give him time to put everything back in the bottom drawer. Let him bury it in there however he wants to. She'll find it.

In the foyer, the phone rang. Before David could run to it, Alice picked it up. She was quiet for a moment, listening.

"This is Aleš Martinec, hi Alice. Can I speak with David?"

“David, it’s for you,” stretching out the receiver, “it’s Aleš.”

“Hey, Aleš,” David exhaled into the phone, pressed it to his ear, and continued in a muffled voice, “what is it this time?”

“Today you’ll need a bucket with water and a mop. Mop with a long stick, David.”

“Is something broken? Door? Windows?”

“It didn’t seem that way.”

“What is it? Spray? Paint? Plaster? Mud?”

“I don’t think it’s mud.” David put his head in his palm and was speechless. He pulled up a chair, feeling a little reinvigorated with the smell of coffee.

“I’ll drive over. I’ll fix it.”

“I’m so sorry, David. I also think you shouldn’t have bought the car. You know, people don’t want to see that. It adds up. People also know that you guys want to warm up in the Dominican Republic this winter.”

“Should I keep it a secret? I wonder if anyone also sees all the projects we support financially.”

“Slow down, don’t be mad at me, David.”

“I know, I’m sorry. It’s only temporary. It’ll pass. I’m sure of it.”

“I hope you’re right. Did any of this reflect on your clientele leaving?”

“No. More and more people are coming, and recently they published a piece about us in Germany. I’d also like to open up an educational institution. For now just introductory programs, and then go from there. It has huge potential. But I’m a little nervous about it, Aleš.”

“I’m glad to hear it. In the winter you’ll have young Janík for extra security, he’ll be the right man for the job.” There was something strange in his tone, as he said this. “Such good fortune for someone so young, who wouldn’t want that. I’m sure he will guard your alternative medicine jewel while you’re getting tanned.” Říha pulled away from the phone and stared at it, confused. The voice continued. “I’m joking, David. Would you like me to come help you right now?”

“No, thank you, Aleš. This I’ll have to do alone.”

“Ok, good luck then, and I’m sorry. Hopefully it’ll stop soon.” David hung up the phone and couldn’t wrap his head around it all. Why is he picking on Dr. Janík so much? Does he want to work there too?

“Is something the matter?” asked Alice. She’d been suspecting for a while now that something’s not right. David looked at her and smiled.

“Everything will be alright. Don’t worry, it will settle. I’ll have the coffee when I get back. I have to go to the clinic now.” She asked no more. Maybe she’ll find some clues about his mood in those letters. Does he have someone else? One of the nurses. Those are always ready to play with someone’s head. They don’t even have to play with their head; men are all the same anyway. Let him go to the clinic then. He spends all his time there anyway.

Doctor Říha walked into the street, and at first didn’t know what’d happened. He looked to the right, to the left, then across the street, and didn’t understand. How come his Fort Mustang was on the other side of the road? “Am I such an idiot!” he mumbled to himself. David slowly crossed the street and walked around his vehicle from all sides. Shaking his head, he looked to his usual parking spot. He was certain he’d parked on his side of the road the night before. Yes, yes, for sure. In front of him was Mrázek’s space, yes, he definitely parked next to the house! Or

was it the day before? Maybe. The car was fine, everything the way it should be, not even a scratch. He unlocked the door and sat down. Nothing unusual.

After a short moment of hesitation David turned the ignition key. Everything was fine. He drove out. Tonight he was driving slower than normally. There were too many question marks in the air.

Alice waited another minute. Then she bent down to the bottom drawer. Locked? How come? The key from the top drawer was missing. But she found it in the upper left drawer. Easy.

In her hands she was now holding a total of twelve envelopes. All were open and addressed in red pen. That didn't look like love letters. She withdrew the first one and read.

DID SHE LIKE HER RIDE IN THE MUSTANG? MAYBE THERE'S A SOUVENIR PHOTO.

She flipped the letter over and felt disgusted by it. What does this mean? Carefully, she returned it into the envelope and took a second one. Alice continued to read.

DO YOU THINK THAT CLINIC OF YOURS IS FLAMMABLE?

Her heart was pounding now. She replaced the sheet and reached for a third one.

THE CLINIC CAUSES YOU WORRY, DOESN'T IT? DO YOU WANT TO LOSE THE CLINIC, OR YOUR LIF...

Alice screamed. She didn't want to read that. Frightened, she dropped the letter on the floor. Had no courage to read on. She covered her mouth and burst out crying.

Doctor Řiha parked in front of the Alternative Clinic and for a minute just watched from a distance. On the glass entrance door, the wall, and on the information board was hideously smeared what he'd already guessed from his conversation with Aleš. He thought that deoxyribonucleic acid may help here, and grinned a little at the thought.

He was about to get out of his car, when his cell phone rang. David picked up and introduced himself. Silence on the other end. Nobody there. At least nobody said anything, and no number appeared on the display. Řiha looked around. Sunday morning. In front of the clinic an elderly couple was casually walking their dog, two girls walking towards them in the opposite direction, giggling at something, and across at the garden centre a young guy was pushing a wheelbarrow with dirt. Also an elderly woman, whom David recognized, was shaking her small boy's hand; he evidently didn't want to go for a walk. Closing the phone, David stepped out of the car, continuing to look around. He didn't see anyone.

Still, David felt as though someone was watching him while he washed the wall.

Cards are on the table

"Kačenka, come back here, I want to ask you about it one more time."

"But I'm bored, I already told you everything."

"I know, Kačenka, I know. One last time, and then I'll read to you about those lions, ok? I

promise. Deal?”

“Deal. But for real, daddy.”

“Here’s my hand.” They shook hands, and little Kačenka began talking, for the fourth time that afternoon. Behind the window it began raining, since the morning it’d been overcast as though to foreshadow bad news, it was an evening in the autumn of ninety-seven.

“We were walking home from school with Broňa and Andrea, slowly because Broňa got a new doll-stroller and was telling us about it...”

“...yes, but what happened next? Then you met that man?”

“No, dad, I already told you. He was standing on the corner and was talking to some other woman and a guy.”

“Yes, you said that. What were they wearing? Try to remember, Kačenka,” he pressed on.

“I don’t know. I really don’t. A suit jacket, I guess. The lady had a red dress and a white coat. I don’t recall all too well anymore.”

“Alright, alright, Kačenka. And now tell me, that’s important: neither Broňa nor Andrew knew any of them?”

“No. They were strangers. We don’t know them. I already told you, daddy.”

“I know, yes. And what exactly did the man say to you? Was it the older one or the younger one?”

“The younger one. You already know it. He asked me if I’m Katherine Říha and when I...”

“He stopped you?”

“No. Actually yes. When we were passing them, he turned to us. Only me, actually. And when I told him, yes, he said to say ‘hi’ to you and ask you, if you have a better alternative. Alternative. Alternative. Something. So I gave you the message.”

“Ok, good, Kačenka. And now about the lions, right?”

“Yaaaay!”

Alice entered the room and sat next to Kačenka on the edge of the bed.

“Mommy, what is ‘alternative’?” Alice glanced at David and answered in a way that was for Kačenka incomprehensible.

“It’s our curse, you know?” and continued, “David, Dr. Janík called a few minutes ago, he wanted to come over. He has something important for you. But I’ll tell you, I’m getting tired of it. We didn’t sign up for this.”

“What do you mean? I founded a health institution and it’s successful...”

“Sure. And you also play in a band, write, lecture at the university, and now we bought a car like from the movies. People see things.”

“Janík called?”

“Yes. Just now. He’ll be here in twenty minutes. I’d love it if nobody mentioned the clinic. I can’t imagine anything that would attract me about it anymore, when I know what I know. Or see. I see you, the way you look, and what people are doing to you. Where is it all headed? Don’t you read enough about this stuff in the newspaper? Found at the bottom of the dam with a radiator tied to his back?”

“Daddy, read, you promised...”

“Of course, you’re right. Alice, I’ll read to her for a bit, and maybe you can prepare a bite to eat for Janík.”

“I don’t know what else awaits me.” She left the room and David began reading. Kačenka fell

asleep after two paragraphs.

David walked around like a caged bear, impatiently and anxiously. At quarter to nine, the doorbell finally rang.

"I won't beat around the bush, David. Good evening, Ms. Říha, it smells really nice here, are you baking? What is it?"

"Coffee-cake, you'll taste it in a bit, don't worry. Go to the other room, you two."

"I look forward to it, thank you. David, come here, you don't know everything."

As soon as he sat down, Dr. Janík jumped right in.

"The real-estate property of the Alternative Clinic is the subject of a legal process."

"What? What do you mean 'subject of a legal process'? Why?"

"There's a group of people who claim that you got the building illegally..."

"...but that's nonsense. It was a closed down kindergarten for ten months and I legally..."

"You don't have to tell me. I know this."

"...completely legally I applied for privatizat..."

"...please, David. David do you hear me? It indicates that someone else is interested. That's all."

"And what do I have to do with that? Is that why I'm being targeted by someone?"

"Exactly." Dr. Janík did not look especially troubled. As though he was unaware that he too was one of Říha's team. He continued: "At least one thing is positive here."

"I'd like to know what that might be."

"That nobody will set it on fire." Doctor Říha helplessly threw up his hands, stopping Alice, who'd just entered the room with a coffee tray in hand, in her tracks. That was a bizarre comment. She came across the possibility of a 'fire' recently. She didn't want to meddle in the whole thing; she already suspected what human envy can do. She feared those who prioritize financial gain above everything else. Envy, jealousy, and maliciousness are in their blood. Even so, she entered the conversation.

"Why do you think someone would want to set it on fire? You mean test its 'flammability'?" Now even David was confused. Did she say this on purpose? It's a provocative phrase, which he's been keeping secret in the bottom drawer. Why did she say this? At first he looked at Alice, then at Janík, waiting for a response.

"Because that's the first thing! When someone has something nice, others destroy it, no? Scratch the paint on a new car, break a window." Yes, that sounded logical.

"...yes, yes, that's true. If they can't have it themselves, let no one have it." David cracked the mystery.

"That's right. And so I think maybe you should abandon the whole thing." Janík said that calmly. Had he prepared this, and arrive at the Říha's with this solution in mind? Would he give up so easily? But perhaps it is wiser than constantly facing risk. Yes, he's right. If he shakes them off, and the court that Janík mentioned agrees with Říha and his Clinic, then there's no telling what can happen – even that fire. Is there a solution?

"Jirka," David took a bite of the cake, "do you know who this group is?"

"How would I know that?"

"I'm asking, because maybe we could resolve this peacefully."

"Do you really think they'll listen? 'Peacefully' means that we drop it. Put it up for sale. That's all I can say about it." Where is that boldness in his voice coming from? He didn't used to

be like this. Or maybe it's a new assertive attitude with which Janík's defending his friend and teacher? Does he see what Říha doesn't? Surely that's it. He senses an open danger, and wants to defend him resolutely. That's what it is. He can't suspect everyone of trickery and foul play. Janík is a great, honest guy and is simply being confident. That's how it should be, anyway. He's a stand-up man and is worried about David.

"I'm glad you told me all this, Jirka. It's really important. At least we know what the motive may be. That is valuable."

They talked, touched on lighter topics, exchanged a few jokes, and around eleven Janík got up to leave. Everyone was in a better mood. Such clearing of the air is healthy, even if there's no solution yet. David was glad that Janík had his back in all this, and felt fortunate he'd asked him to join his practice. He's not the type of person to become blinded by money. They say everyone has their price. But that's not true for someone like Janík. He came to warn David, help him see the bigger picture. Such friends are hard to find.

They said 'good night' and, laughing, Dr. Janík asked for another helping of the coffee-cake to take home. That gesture was welcome. He showed his appreciation for David's wife's baking as well as his confidence to express his thoughts. From the window, David watched him cross the street and get into his...what?

"Alice, Alice, come here, quick. Look at him, what an industrious guy! So young and already successful enough to afford a...." David stopped talking and both of them stared at each other in surprise.

The decision

As he was leaving campus, David let pass by a group of his students on their way from lecture. He stood behind the heavy door for a moment, observing the outside world through the glass window-panes. At the opposite side of the street was parked his Ford Mustang and nothing indicated that something was wrong. The vehicle was exactly where he'd left it in the morning, on the roof and windshield a fresh blanket of snow. It snowed all morning, but now the sky above the roofs of the majestic buildings of his alma mater glistened in blue. The year ninety-eight was becoming interesting. An azure-colored day, ripe for cross-country skiing. They could go with Alice. They'll take a sled for Kačenka, that's a great idea. Shake off the stress a little. Hopefully it's all behind them now. The Alternative Clinic now shows its positive side. Soon he'll be able to reduce his hours in surgery and his lecturing hours, too. For the summer semester, he'll choose the hours he wants. David was smiling and nodding to himself. Yes, the world is a bright place after all. Finally he'll also be able to find time for his charitable work for disabled children. For a second, he felt almost ashamed that he'd devoted so much time to the clinic. The clinic is gaining in popularity and brings in revenue. That's a signal for greater popularity and increased activity. It'll be fine. Everything will settle.

David stepped out into the gorgeous winter day and headed toward his car. He swept away snow enough to open the door and grab the broom. Students were passing by, greeting him, some deep in thought and others laughing. Those were the ones who'd completed their exams before the deadline, he figured.

"I hope that you'll stop for us when we're hitch-hiking, professor," giggled two young students from his lectures.

"That's why I'm clearing away the snow," said David cheerfully. A day as it should be. Yes, in

the afternoon they'll go cross-country skiing; Alice deserves a break too.

He drove out. The drive was pleasant, allowing him to clear his head. Everything will be great from now on.

One intersection, a second one, a left-hand turn, strange. A white Škoda was close behind him the whole time. Is it following him or not? He continued, glancing in his rear-view mirror frequently now. He found himself on a straight and clear segment of the road, further from the busy centre. The Škoda still in tow. What does this mean? At the next intersection David was hoping for a green light, but the Škoda signaled and David slowed down. The light turned red, so he stopped. Is it the police? Did he do something? Speeding? It's possible.

The Škoda slowly pulled up beside him and from the rear window someone extended a hand. They were giving him something. David opened his window, and before he was able to do anything else, someone threw an object from the front window inside the vehicle. He missed. The object struck the door-frame of Dr. Říha's car and rolled to the ground. David looked at the snow-covered road and felt a chill down his spine. The thing was smoking. A metallic cylinder that was smoking, almost imperceptibly. He didn't wait for the green light, bolted into the intersection and left behind the Škoda that immediately broke into pursuit. In the mirror David saw an explosion. He didn't hear anything – he was quite far at this point – but understood. The traffic situation did not permit for him to fully unleash the horse-power under his hood. The road was slippery, winding, and heavy traffic all around him. The Škoda appeared immediately behind him. Who's in there? Four? Or three of them? His heart was pounding. He pressed on the gas pedal as soon as it was at least a little bit possible. He got to a shorter street, the engine thundering as the vehicle picked up power. In the rear-view mirror appeared the pursuing car, launching from behind the curve and chasing Říha's Mustang. He took a right turn and wanted to continue, but was halted by a sign and a construction dug-out. He slowed down, waited for an oncoming Renault to pass, but before he could step on the gas again the Škoda was at his bumper. David darted out and now he was disregarding traffic regulations completely. He has to shake them off. The streets were not ready for such a car chase, but Říha knew that he had no choice. Until now, he only knew such situations from the movies. But in real streets, in the actual seat of his own car, when his wet palms clutch the steering wheel and he is actually being followed and hunted, it is something entirely different. Říha talked to himself quietly: "straight there, right signal, but I'll take a left...what is it?...who...go, go...bug off, bug off...ok now...right...right...good good, very good...." He realized there's no point in losing time and distracting himself by checking the rear-view mirror. Just straight ahead, regardless of what's behind. Just go! Bit further, a little further still, now he'll take a short detour and quickly slip into the far left lane.

Only now did David glance in the rear-view mirror. What? Where are they? Did he get rid of them? As he was alone in the car, David shouted loudly: "Good!" clenching his right fist and hitting the steering wheel.

He eased up and only then his hands began to shake. He took a deep breath, as it all started to hit him. Fuelled with adrenaline, he hadn't fully realized what was happening. He was acting on instinct.

Now he reached for his cell and called home.

"Alice?"

"Where are you, David, I was starting to worry."

“Oh nothing. You’re ok?”

“Yes, I am. Did something happen? Don’t tell me something else with the clinic.”

“No, no,” but it didn’t sound convincing, “everything’s fine. I was thinking we could go out and enjoy the snow. Grab cross-country skis and a sled for Kačenka.”

“It’s up to you, David. If it’s not too late already.” David looked at his watch. Three-thirty? That’s unbelievable!

“Ok, I’ll just come home then. I have had a long day today, anyway. Are you alright, Alice?”

“Yes, why wouldn’t I be?”

“And Kačenka?”

“David, what is it? Is something wrong?”

“No, I just worry. That’s all. So I’ll be home in a little bit.” He wanted to end the conversation before Alice would begin to ask questions.

He turned on the radio and tried to forget about it. Maybe it was supposed to be just to scare him. And what if it was just a prank, unrelated to his clinic and to him? A coincidence. Maybe it was just a coincidence and he started to panic. Even so, certain words kept coming to him like a tape recording; words to which he should probably pay some attention. It was Štěrba, who recently told him with an unpleasant smile: “...it’s thanks to you, rich folk, that us proletariat are visible. So I’m actually thankful to you that you finally showed me where I belong...”

When they were scrubbing in last week before surgery, Aleš Martinec joked: “...the O.R. nurses can fashion an ‘alternative’ scalpel made of flint...” Is it just jokes, or no? Humor that’s healthy, or malicious?

And what was it that Franta Stárnský said the other day? It was on Saturday, when they were rehearsing with Dixidem. He was folding up his clarinet, when he lamented: “...if alternative music made as much money as alternative medicine, I’d convert today.”

Říha wasn’t sure if he was being overly sensitive. People often poke at each other sarcastically. Yes, he has money, but is that really the common trigger for all that he’s going through? It’s bizarre. And then Janík. Jirka Janík. How can he know that the clinic’s building, because of its location and adjoining land, has a financial value much higher than the price that he’d paid? That was simply the set price – David didn’t come up with the price-tag. It also wasn’t the purpose of his investment. Actually, how could Janík even know this? Or is it just his common sense and he’s deducing all this? Probably. Anyone with eyes can see the place is valuable. But still, how does he know how much he’d paid for it? Maybe David himself mentioned it. Of course. They probably discussed it at some point. What else?

Dr. Říha pulled up in front of his building, got out of the car and shut the door. Something drew his eyes to the back seat – opening the door again he grabbed a letter. At that moment, he didn’t know that Alice was watching him from behind the curtain. Red writing. How did it get in the car? It was locked. Or wasn’t it? Perhaps he forgot to lock the door. His fingers were trembling as he was opening the envelope. He pulled out the folded letter and read. Alice could see that David was reading, and understood that it hasn’t stopped. But she didn’t know what he was reading. David slowly folded the letter back into the envelope, stared at it for another minute and then he returned it to the car. He didn’t even want to bring it home. This Alice really doesn’t need to know. It’s up to him to make a decision. He’s the captain of the ship and he has the responsibility.

David felt like throwing up, as he was climbing up the stairs to their apartment. He wanted to shake it off, snap out of it, but it was too strong. The text kept returning before his eyes.

IF YOU DON'T LET GO OF THE CLINIC, YOUR DAUGHTER WON'T FIND HER WAY HOME FROM SCHOOL.

On the road

"If you'd told me everything, then...then we would've done it long ago." Alice still couldn't recover from the precipitous chain of events.

"But you didn't want to. And besides, we're not going to run away like partisans. We didn't hurt anyone and have nothing to hide. I wanted everything to be in order, all the papers ready to go. What good would it do us, if we had to explain somewhere that we're not running from the law. Nobody would believe us."

"I still don't know if it was necessary."

"What? Alice, I hope you believe me that I'm not taking this lightly. We won't feel complete there. I know that."

"How do you mean?"

"We're bringing our brain, hands, even money; we've sent by ship what's close to our heart, but we can't bring everything. How can a person take their heart when it's here?" Alice looked at him, thought about his words, and kissed him.

"You're a good man."

Suitcases were checked in and already disappearing in the airport's interior, except for David's black saxophone case which he carried on. Their sizeable wooden box with books of Hrabal, Seifert, Čapek, with pictures, cd's of Gott, Matuška, Semafor, Holzmann, clothing, Kačenka's most cherished toys, with blankets and bedding, and a thousand of irreplaceable trinkets, all the small ceramic vases and figurines that are not worth moving and still they can't be left behind, that box was already sitting among dozens of other containers, swinging on the waves of the Atlantic. At home they left just the bare walls. At home.

Alice and David weren't talking. Now they were all waiting in the airport chairs and through the glass wall they looked out into a spring day of the year nineteen ninety-eight. The day will stay here. With the classroom full of medical students, the operating room, fun-filled boisterous soirées, his clinic, the charitable organization, Dixiemed. But that was only the surface. He knew that much deeper lie their memories, those he dared not touch. David knew that he could not fail now. Alice and Kačenka depended on him. They know that he has the compass. He always had the compass. But does he know himself whether he's holding any compass? On these airport chairs it's just them three – with each other and themselves – and around them, behind the glass walls, was beginning a spring that no longer belonged to them. Somewhere in the grass, violets and lilies of the valley, but they smell only for the locals. The spring will turn to summer. They're bringing with them three calendars. Inside them, Kámen, Trosky, Kačina, Landštejn, Kost, Pernštejn,...they'll always have those. Frozen, preserved, muted photographs, isolated moments that in reality continued on. There's no sense in looking back. But is that possible? Relatives, parents, siblings, friends, colleagues. Staying are also those who pursued him in the white Škoda. How come that, even those who don't deserve it, get to have this spring? Říha turned away from Alice and Kačenka and put on his sunglasses. That way, nobody

would see that his eyes began to swell.

Their flight to Frankfurt was called. They got up and Kačenka waved with her teddy bear. Before her was a new fairy-tale adventure; before Alice, faith in the right steps of her husband, and before David his resolve.

David managed to get window seats for the cross-oceanic flight. For Alice and for Kačenka. He wanted them to have that experience.

Just as Europe was disappearing and shrinking behind their backs and the snowy plains and mountains of Greenland stretched beneath them, so too seemed further the thorny weeks from before. They left them behind, and David felt that nothing could get to them now. A warm feeling came over him, that for the steep price he's buying their family's safety. As though they were walking through Alice's mirror in Wonderland. Nobody can catch that plane. He looked over at Alice and Kačenka, peacefully sleeping in the deep seats. He felt happy, proud. He was smiling, and knew that some clinic and a Mustang cannot possibly compare. You can keep your clinic; I'll keep my two girls.

Deep underneath the machine's windows, in the foggy haze, stretched out prairies stitched through with the regular pattern of roads. Flat and wide like a table without an end lay the snow-covered plains. Occasionally, the monolith was interrupted with a farm settlement or a town.

The landing gear rumbled and the plane began to descend, shaking lightly. As the engine changed speeds, they could now see skyscrapers, rising from the plain in the distance. Impressive and grand, beautiful and different. In their backdrop, the majestic mountainous panorama. So that's the world. Here they will be happy. Here they'll find peace and new joys. They need nothing but each other. The land of cowboys, large cars, big houses, great opportunity. Freedom in its fullest. The way he wanted it all those years. Finally it's here. So far away seemed to him the sifting through anonymous letters with a pounding heart. David suddenly couldn't wait for the wheels to touch the tarmac.

They got above the city, streams of cars rushing in both directions underneath. The engines thundered again and the runway was within reach now, disappearing fast behind them. With a noticeable bump the plane landed.

Everything so different, so massive, so new. They're here. They all felt as though everything was happening outside of them, all the sounds and voices were coming from somewhere else, another world. How will they grab this new world and not get lost in it? Where to begin? There's no turning back now. Alice and Kačenka are waiting what he'll decide, say, and where he'll lead them. They're relying on him. David suddenly felt anxious when he noticed that Alice and Kačenka are immediately behind him, following his every move.

"So we're here, you crazies!" he shouted cheerfully, "we'll throw our suitcases in the cab and drive to this address. That's them. They're supposed to be nice people."

"I'm hungry," whimpered Kačenka.

"So far we don't have any...one sec, I have the money here from the bank. Here it is. Look, there's something there." Dragging their luggage behind them they found the first food vendor. David was confident in his English skills. It was enough to convince those in his immediate surrounding that he spoke English. How foolish his belief turned out to be. David turned to a friendly girl behind the counter, his sentence grammatically quite correct. Except that he wasn't prepared for her response. She was asking him something. What? He'd pointed to the board

and the correct menu number behind her. That's what they wanted. The meal would contain a drink and fries, as well as a burger. Everything together. What is she asking him? The girl repeated the question with unchanged intonation and with unfamiliar words. David tried: "Yes!" figuring she'd make something out.

The girl began loading their order into paper bags and David felt a little disappointed they didn't get a tray like everyone else. They could've sat down and eat it right here. Why is she putting it in bags? No matter. He pulled out a crisp thousand-dollar bill and offered it to the girl. All eyes turned to the bill, the sales-girl pulling away her hands as soon as she touched it. Then she said something quickly.

"It looks they don't have any small cash. Hopefully someone will make change." David stood helplessly, smiling politely across the counter, now feeling hungry too. Looking from left to right, it appeared he was bragging about his large bill. The customers were retreating and it didn't seem the sales-girl was going to take the money. She took away the filled bags, so that David couldn't reach them. From her tone he figured out that she's sending them to change the money somewhere. David turned around with the bill still in his hand, giving the impression it was a ticking bomb. There was nowhere to change it. He put it back in his wallet, which everyone around him seemed to welcome.

They lifted their suitcases and walked out of the air terminal into a drizzle outside.

The anchors

"Kačenka, Kačenka, put that down. Where did you find that?" whispered Alice, "Mrs. James would be mad. You know she doesn't like it when you grab stuff that isn't ours. Where did you bring it from?" Short knock and the door opened. After the first three months Alice picked up enough English that she understood. At the moment she was trying to sort out some paperwork – those that seemed like bills to be paid and those related to their search for work.

"That's not for playing," said Mrs. James and reached out her hand. Mrs. Judy James had thick eyebrows and carried enough weight for three other persons. Kačenka obediently handed over a small statue of a wolf howling at the moon attached to a branch next to him. Judy James could not hide with her very wide smile the displeasure that was apparent in her gesture. She wanted to say something else, but changed her mind. She closed the door and Kačenka with her mom were left alone in the room. Alice put a finger on her lips, anticipating Kačenka's commentary. Even though Mrs. James wouldn't understand, Alice didn't want to add to their problems.

The sun came up over the roofs of the neighboring houses, letting them know that the spring of ninety-eight hasn't forgotten about them.

"Daddy will be here soon. Then we'll go out and have something to eat." Kačenka wasn't answering. She was sad and also pouting a little. She didn't break that wolf, did she? She knows it's not a toy. Kačenka didn't like Mrs. James. She was smiling, but Kačenka knew very well that she was strict. Nothing can be touched.

From outside of the house they could suddenly hear two short honks and the sound of an engine. Alice and Kačenka got up and looked out the window. In front of the house stood a brown-colored vehicle, evidently a car with thousands of miles behind it. Grinning in the front seat was David. He turned off the engine that let out one more grunt before it powered down.

“We have a car?” shrieked Kačenka with excitement.

“I don’t know – it looks that way.” The door opened, David ecstatically gesturing to the window and inviting both of them to join him. What a beautiful day for an outing. Now the world of opportunity grew wider. It’s a start. Only when they have a car can they count themselves amongst the ‘locals’. They knew from the beginning that everyone needs a car here. They were able to purchase an older automobile right away, but soon realized that they were wrong to assume that David’s driver’s license was internationally valid. They had to obtain a local license. A valid one.

“So where will it be, young ladies?” he was beaming as soon as they appeared outside the door. Close behind them followed Mrs. James. She had a faint smile on her face, but with her words she immediately cooled their mood for travelling.

“Will it leak oil?”

“I’m not sure, Mrs. James. If it does, I’ll add more.” She took a breath and turned red in the face. Maybe he went too far. David kept an innocent expression, though, and Alice struggled to keep in an outburst of laughter. Mrs. James turned around and, without another word, returned back to the house.

“Get in! ordered dad Říha. Our first expedition begins right now.” Alice sat in the front seat and glowing Kačenka in the middle of the wide back seat. David continued. “It’s Crown Victoria, year eighty-one. Only three hundred and twenty-six thousand kilometers, on Canadian, American, maybe even Mexican roads. The next stretch of kilometers will be added by us.” The machine thundered loudly as David turned the ignition and peeled away from the curb. It moved surprisingly smoothly and softly.

“An automatic gear-shift and it works like a charm.”

“What’s the clicking sound in there?”

“I have no clue. If it’s supposed to be ‘clicking’ – all the better. And if not, it’ll stop when the car stops.”

“You’re crazy! I love it!” cheered Alice.

“It’s ours?” shouted Kačenka gleefully.

“All of it, with all its wheels, Kačenka. It’s ours.”

Underneath the dashboard hung several loose wires, the rear left window opening freely as the trip progressed. The shape and color of Alice’s seat indicated that they’d been from another vehicle, but that still didn’t take away any of their shared joy.

“If we leave the city limits, we’ll see the mountains. Amazing. Let’s go!” Říha was beaming like a child.

“David, and were you able to finish some of those errands? Did you go to the University? Will they accept your Diploma? Do you have to pass any exams?”

“Answers are as follows. No, yes, no, yes. Information forthcoming; no talking to the driver.”

“Still talking to the driver. Do you have work?”

“Affirmative answer.” David behaved as if he’d taken a sip from the fountain of fools. He was happy about everything. He’s found a job, he’s driving his own car again and it’s a gorgeous day. He stepped on the gas, as the wide road permitted him to do.

Suddenly, before he even realized his speed, a policeman appeared about fifty feet in front of him, gesturing for him to pull over.

“You idiot,” David muttered to himself. The ride lost its luster. Doctor Říha obediently

stopped by the side of the road. He should have noticed the white car – marked ‘POLICE’ – a little earlier. He felt guilty. But it was the euphoria and a sense of drunkenness of the first drive! David slowly turned to the glove-compartment on the passenger’s side, hoping to take out his driver’s license.

A sharp order came from the outside. Once more. Something happened. The policeman was yelling something. Alice was tapping David’s shoulder, scared to say a word, while Kačenka began to cry in the back seat. David slowly lifted his head and saw that the scene in front of the hood of their Crown Victoria had changed. About three meters away from them stood two policemen, both outstretched arms and each holding a gun. Then David noticed that a third non-compromising policeman is aiming his gun from behind the vehicle. David had no idea what he’d done wrong. Did they confuse him with someone? He didn’t understand the shouts but knew they didn’t sound kind in the least. Should he reach for his license? Probably not. What do they want? The order was repeated, even more strictly.

“What’s going on?” whispered David. He sat immobile. Both hands folded in his lap, looking from side to side and at the policemen, bewildered. Now the situation seemed to be even worse. In the rear-view mirror, David could see that traffic behind him had stopped. Surely they won’t actually shoot? Kačenka was crying and Alice’s face was white as porcelain. The policeman standing in the back was now cautiously moving towards David’s door, and peeked inside. He saw two empty hands on David’s knees. He yelled something else to the others and they relaxed their combative postures. David cautiously turned to the policeman and rolled down his window.

The policeman began speaking slowly and clearly, and it was only now that David began to comprehend the situation. He was asking him about his license and registration. Říha truthfully responded that they were in the glove compartment. The policeman then asked him to leave his left hand on the wheel, and use the two fingers of his right hand to open the compartment and pull out the documents. David was listening as intently as his daughter should. Then he was instructed to put both his palms back on the wheel. Ok, why not? No need for the guns! Only now did the other two put away their weapons. David handed the policeman his driver’s license and his new, still unfolded, registration papers. But the policeman was still not satisfied. He wanted something else. Now David didn’t know. After he’d repeated his request for the third time, David understood that it was about insurance. He explained that the car was brand new today and that he was planning to take care of insurance right away, after they’d returned home. That was not a good answer.

The Říhas were told that they had been driving seventy-two kilometers per hour, where they should’ve been driving fifty. Also, without insurance, they were guaranteed to pay at least five hundred and eighty dollars. Without twenty dollars, it was the total value of their car.

They set out to complete their maiden voyage at a much slower tempo. David spoke first.

“Actually, I was given a prize for the fastest driver.”

“You’re so crazy. I don’t know why it had to be me to find such a lunatic.” Alice wasn’t smiling yet, but hopefully her joking was a good sign. David had additional news.

“Next to a new vehicle, I also have a new job.”

“Out with it. From now on, tell me every piece of good news several times.”

“It’s not what you’d want ideally, but it’s a step forward. It will enable us to apply for loans and maybe even a mortgage, because it’s a real employment.”

“And what type of a job is it? Is it at least a little related to your field?”

“Here we’ll get off the highway and see the mountains. It’s a gorgeous day today. You know, look at it this way, the speeding ticket can be understood as part of the car’s cost. And we enjoyed a fast ride. So it’s practically a victory.” Alice put her head in her hands and persisted with her question: “What’s the job, David?”

Behind the door

“Do you think she did it on purpose?” They were sitting in the food court of a mall, eating an Asian-style menu selection.

“She wants to get rid of us,” replied David, “she sees that you’re earning money, Kačenka is enrolled in school so there’ll be more commotion at home, she’s fed up.”

“That was clear from the beginning. I don’t think it was a good tip. There are probably better landlords who’d give us a better rate. Are we able to make it, David? Kačenka needs a new wardrobe, she outgrew everything. It’s true that I haven’t outgrown anything, but I also haven’t bought anything new since we got here.”

It was snowing outside, the year ninety-nine began with a tough cold, and they didn’t feel like going outside into the freezing discomfort. They felt more privacy at the mall. There was so much to talk about.

“I know. It’s not a matter of the landlord. Everyone will take as much of our money as we’ll be willing to give them. We have to buy something of our own. The sooner, the better. Since you’re asking, I’ll tell you honestly. It’s not going as I’d hoped.”

People passed through the food court, teenagers taking advantage of the wide hallway for ‘chance’ encounters and mutual exchanging of glances. It would probably be interesting to watch the crowd’s dynamic, if one was in the mood. David took a sip of coke from his paper cup and counted.

“Old hag James officially raised our rent to eleven hundred, beginning the first of February ninety-nine. Phone and laundry are extra. It’s a crime, but what can we do. We’re also paying for the storage of our boxes that arrived from the Czech Republic. Then came the transmission repair; we can’t avoid that. Car insurance and health insurance and now also the student loans for medical exams. I had to buy the textbooks – no way around it. Winter clothes, also unavoidable. And we have to eat something. You have nine dollar an hour for the occasional cleaning, but they only call you when someone else calls in sick.”

“Starting in March I might get a ‘point seven’ contract. Maybe.”

“Yes. That would help a lot. I get paid twelve an hour in the warehouse and it’s also part-time. Right now. If I completed the certification for a fork-lift operator, it would be more. Right now, if I’m also going to do those medical exams, it’s not enough.” Kačenka didn’t understand everything, but she knew that she couldn’t have everything the other girls in her classroom had. At least it was lucky that she was picking up English fast. She hadn’t even noticed that she understood TV shows at Mrs. James’ better than mom and dad did.

“So what will we do? And when do you think you’ll actually finish those exams?”

“It won’t be right away. But if I end up earning what physicians here make, maybe we’ll be laughing in a few months or a year. You’ll see.”

“But what do we do now? Maybe you could talk to that woman. Surely she doesn’t pay for

her mortgage what she's charging us for rent."

"You're right, but what does it have to do with us? But maybe I have another solution, Alice."

They hung around the mall a little longer, looking into store windows. The weather outside was unwelcoming. The deepfreeze of minus twenty was supposed to last another week, then it should warm up.

They arrived back at the house around eight in the evening. Mrs. James was sitting in front of the television, watching a contest where audience members guessed the prices of various items. David turned to Alice, taking advantage of his knowledge of a mysterious European tongue. He said casually: "Nobody in the world would guess the price this withered hag is charging for our rent."

Alice knew what proposal he would suggest to Mrs. James. She didn't love the idea but at the same time she let herself be convinced that it would only be temporary. There were two options. Mrs. James will either grasp the situation and reduce her horrendous price, or she'll just accept the proposal. In either case, it's a success.

As soon as they'd settled in a little, David approached Mrs. James.

"We really appreciate that we're able to live here, and feel...we feel safe here. The two small bedrooms and a bathroom in the basement are a good space. I was wondering whether it would be alright for us to free up the larger of the two rooms for you. You mentioned there was a student who wanted to rent. I trust it may allow you to decrease our rent." Mrs. James turned down the volume on her TV and looked at Řiha.

"But you can't fit three beds into the small bedroom. What do you mean?"

David took a breath and continued: "There's a Christian organization that lets small rooms at no cost. The shower's in the hallway, but I could go there. My wife and daughter would stay here and I'd move into the dorm. We're planning to apply for a mortgage to buy a house soon. Within two months we'd like to buy something of our own. We think we may qualify for a mortgage now. I'd also have a quieter place to study. A temporary solution." Judy James was looking from one to the other and couldn't figure whether David's declaration was real or ironic. She'll agree and see what the 'doctor' will do.

"If you're serious, you can move out tomorrow, and I'll count four-fifty for rent monthly. Today's the ninth of February, so we'll count back to the first, if you leave tomorrow. You're right. There's a girl from the Philippines, who's going to pay nine hundred for that room. But if you'd like the larger one, it would be more. For the smaller one, four hundred and eighty."

"A moment ago you said four-fifty."

"Now I'm saying four-eighty." Alice and David exchanged glances and David nodded.

"It works for us." Mrs. James shrugged and turned up the TV volume.

They walked back downstairs into the room they'd rented until now. David began folding in silence his shirts and pants, underwear, socks, and textbooks. Alice watched him with tight lips and tears in her eyes.

"It's not a big deal, Alice. Just for now. We need the money, so that we can really start up here. I booked the room over there in the dorm – they're holding it for me. For forty-eight hours. There's nothing else we can do. We'll phone each other. And soon we'll buy a house, I'll complete the exams, and return to medicine. Don't forget this is a temporary phase. Everyone goes through it."

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