

An abstract painting featuring a rabbit with a pink face and a dog on a green platform. The background is a mix of grey, white, and black with various colored lines and shapes. The text is overlaid on the right side of the painting.

# Ján Johanides But Crime Does Punish

Translated by  
Julia and Peter Sherwood

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Translated from the Slovak by Julia and Peter Sherwood

Afterword by Robert B. Pynsent

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ján Johanides** (1934–2008) is one of the most original writers of Slovak and Czechoslovak postwar literature. Born in northern Slovakia, he studied art history and aesthetics at Comenius University in Bratislava and subsequently worked as a company psychologist in a television manufacturing plant, as an administrator of the Slovak Writers' Union, in the culture department of the Bratislava city administration, and at the Institute of Art Criticism and Theatre Documentation. After 1972, he lived in the southwest Slovak town of Šaľa, where he devoted his time to his literary career. A prolific author, he published over 20 novels, novellas and short story collections between 1963 and 2005, garnering awards and critical acclaim for his psychologically incisive and stylistically accomplished works. *But Crime Does Punish* (*Trestajúci zločin*, 1995) is one of several books written after the Velvet Revolution, in which he grappled with the painful legacy of the country's totalitarian past. It is the first book by Ján Johanides to appear in an English translation.

All my life I have been saying, obligingly: May I? May I? May I? - the way you do when you try to fight your way down the crowded corridor of an express train, but people heading in the opposite direction have always politely pushed me back, back to the place where I uttered my first "May I?" And that is why I'm laughing now.

It was here, in this castle, in this last refuge - that is, in this *donjon*, or somewhere around here, in the middle of this oriel to be precise, before these three windows, the tallest in the castle, perhaps in precisely the same spot where you and I are sitting now - that the chatelain of the royal castle would spend many a night, keeping vigil.

Sometimes, mostly in the autumn and usually late at night, when I open the window to clear cigarette smoke and my poetry from the room, which by this time of the morning tends to have become even more stale than usual, I sense the chatelain's presence. Not that I hear floorboards creaking or door handles turning, no: I am no advocate of ghosts. I simply sense the chatelain's presence - and by that I don't mean his personal presence, but rather something from four centuries ago. As if someone's presence has continued to linger here, in this oriel window. Someone who has stayed up all night in this place, someone who has been complicit - while at the same time keeping his distance from his own complicity - and for this reason his confusion could not betray anyone. For I have a confession to make: there is precious little in this world that I relish more than maintaining a certain distance from what I am experiencing at this very moment, from what at this very moment I am obliged to experience.

So you'd say this is more of a small goblet than a glass, would you? Don't be deceived by appearances: it is just

the thickness of the glass that makes it seem like that. Good old glass. – That glass over there, the one filled with red wine, is also just an ordinary glass, just like the ones you and I are drinking from and which you have called goblets. – Your health. – So let me say it again: welcome to my home. You're right: this kirsch is truly superb. Mind you, that's something I deserve credit for. We are fortunate enough to have a first-rate distillery in the neighbourhood. A renowned distillery. Its manager is rather aged, but he is a genius of a man, a legend of a man, someone who still knows "who" the distilled spirit is rather than "what" it is. Except that in his case one swallow really does make a summer: that's what makes our distillery peerless. Some people – and our distiller is an example – have a capacity for emotion that goes well beyond the lack of sensitivity typical of the majority who make do with sensations, presenting them as emotions. So, you think that I am first and foremost my own spectator. So be it. To your health, once more. By the way – has my dog given a paw to you yet? Regent, have you given a paw to our visitor? Come here, give a paw to our visitor, there's a good boy! – Hm. He won't: that's rather unusual. Normally it's the other way round. He often goes out of his way to give a paw. The only people he won't give a paw to are those he has taken a dislike to, or who are at death's door. Don't take it personally.

Do you detect... do you really think that you detect a look of despair in Regent's eyes? – Why? – Do you see in them a kind of pleading helplessness? – Can you read dogs' eyes? – What about their bodies? – He has tautened the odd muscle, his hair is bristling here and there, he seems to be ready to jump, and now – can you hear the sudden barking sounds he is making? While

his watchful eyes are beginning to express something impossible to put into words - and if it *were* possible, it would be too dodgy. That means imprecise. He'd let you see his face and then you could try to decipher it, one syllable at a time. It may simply puzzle you if you don't like dogs. Do you see? My Regent has now turned to me, as if wanting to utter some stern reproof. His resonant, yet hoarse, voice, sounds belligerent more than anything else. Though I admit that it also conveys some fear that is hard to define. This coarse, aggressive fear that springs from his dog's throat that never stopped moving during that first deafening barrage of barking, reminiscent of a deep, full-bloodied cough. In that rasping bark of his there is a kind of distrust as if, at this very moment, the dog were making the utmost effort to reprimand his master or, at least, to articulate by this hoarse yelping how his master should behave.

You can see it yourself: my dog has taken a dislike to you, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't continue this conversation.

It is odd, to say the least: now my dog seems to have taken against you, and earlier today there was this woman. A woman who came to warn me about you indirectly.

Just imagine, at about a quarter past seven this morning, a completely strange woman turns up here, claiming she has been sent by our mutual friend. That would, of course, be none other than our dear pharmacist Mr Hubert Vrtiak. She said he'd asked her to tell me that we - that is, you, Mr Klementini, and I - should postpone our meeting for the time being. I asked her why. She replied, somewhat brusquely, that all she had been told was to pass on this message to me, and after a moment's pause she added that Mr Vrtiak was sure to provide me

with a detailed explanation in person. I asked her, probably equally curtly, about the nature of her relationship to Mr Vrtiak: was she a relation of his and why didn't he send her with a note to give me. She replied that she was a good friend of his (I am familiar with the floral type of Vrtiak's lady friends - but she was not one of that kind). I remarked that I would verify the message at once, and immediately rang the pharmacist, on the quite erroneous assumption that I would not find him at the pharmacy precisely on account of this matter. Surprisingly enough, he was there, but all he had to say was what I have told you a moment ago. I remember telling him: But you were insisting that Klementini should come and see me at lunchtime today, and now you've gone and turned everything upside down. Why? At least explain to me briefly what this is all about. Only yesterday, and the day before, you rang to confirm our appointment. He said that he - that is you, Mr Klementini - knew best how much he had done for you so that you'd be obliged to agree to a postponement. I really don't know what service Vrtiak might have done you - he is not exactly one to squander good deeds - but don't worry, I'm not Vrtiak's guard dog. The pharmacist wanted me to give you a ring as soon as possible and cancel your visit. And did I ring you? No, I didn't. So there you have it! You're sitting here, so there's no problem. Or is there? No, everything's fine.

I don't like secretiveness, Mr Klementini. Don't you dare leave now! Yes, that's an order. And an order's an order. You heard me right. I mean it. Don't do anything you might come to regret. Let's have a drop more kirsch instead. Believe me, I couldn't care less about Vrtiak's request that we postpone our meeting - I thought it was just one of his whims, something one can blame on his

astrological calculations. Actually, this message, this information, wouldn't have surprised me at all had it not been conveyed by that incredible woman. If he had just rung me about it himself. No need to be alarmed, I'm sure Regent will gladly give you a paw of his own accord, it just seems to me it's that incredible woman who has given rise to Regent's mistrust. It's rare for this kind of thing to happen to me - it wasn't the message that upset me, as I said, but the woman's appearance. Vrtiak has been known to change his plans on the basis of the horoscopes, which he draws up for you, for me or for himself (as he does from time to time for the following day), even when he had sworn to keep his word. No, what stressed me out was the way that woman looked and behaved.

After the horrifying ringing of the doorbell, I went to open the door.

The first thing that struck me about this woman, above all else, were her enormous, bulging eyes, their whites as white as black people's, as bone china, whites without any visible blood vessels (I wonder if she uses eyedrops), the dark irises melding into the pupils and reflecting the morning light in a way reminiscent of the gleaming black of overripe dark red cherries at dusk. I saw motionless eyes without any make-up. And I felt that they issued some sort of challenge, desire but also, at the same time, a command, that seemed to be driven by some pertinacity, urgency, a doggedness of the kind high fever sometimes lends one's eyes. This unfamiliar woman's face seemed as bloodless as if it had paled after reading a so-called fateful telegram. She had yet to utter a word.

There was no doubt that it was she who had rung the bell, she was the only one who could have done so, taking a tentative step forward, then stopping and retreating,

indeed jumping back from the door. But why? At that moment she seemed to have only just started to approach the door and was about to reach for the doorbell. She rang it in the kind of impatient and peremptory manner you might expect of an ambulance driver, the criminal police or an irate neighbour. I walked towards her. In this young woman there was something of the frailty of a bouquet of dried, fragile blossoms, a posy of immortelles, those unfading, deciduous flowers sold for the winter season. No doubt, in her own way, an uncommonly pretty woman (although beside the striking gold around her neck, a refined eye would immediately discern in the unfamiliar woman's complexion the first signs of ageing, even if the delicate wrinkles on her skin would have been unlikely to attract anyone's attention had she not been wearing jewellery). This woman in a simple dress the colour of a sparrow's breast who stood there in the morning in the doorway, her arms held out before her - as if holding some bulky object that she was about to hand me - had striking fingers and palms: they looked exactly as if the salty flesh of dissected sea fish had been corroding them day in, day out. She can't possibly be working in a canning factory, I thought, staring at her blotchy knuckles. Did she deliberately avoid using hand cream? Or medicated cosmetics? Was she not seeing a dermatologist? Was she handling chemicals without gloves? Deliberately? Perhaps intentionally? She displayed her hands as if flaunting misfortune of some kind. She certainly gave the impression of someone intent on playing cards with her own wounds as if they were jokers. Why couldn't she relax? Why didn't she shake hands, although she had clearly intended to (at least, to judge by the movement she made). Eczema on her hands? Who was this strange

woman? And anyway: if she and the pharmacist were such good friends, why did he let her go around with hands like that? What was it she wanted? Who had she come to see? Why didn't she speak? What was she really after? Why wouldn't she lower those hands of hers? She rang five or six times and by the time I finally got up and went out into the hallway, she was silent and just stood there panting. Was she asthmatic? Had she suddenly lost the faculty of speech? Had she got cramp? A fright? Whom did she seek? Was it me? Why hadn't she uttered a single word yet? Was she looking for a member of staff? Someone from the permanent display of flora and fauna?

Only when I examined her from head to toe, during that anxious moment filled with the loud breath escaping into the silence out of her thin lips, only then was I able to take in the details of her eyes, nose, cheeks, mouth, eyebrows, chin, and temples, and realized that the wholly girl-like face of this woman going on forty had been gradually, roughly moulded by long years of cares, that the way she responded to countless stimuli had been driven by justified fear, that it was her ability to stay as alert as a policeman or a devious murderer that had trained her to exercise caution, which she used as something like traffic-lights. I sensed that, despite the gold around her neck, this unpigeonholeable woman had lived a black-and-white existence, stripped-down and monotonous, over a vast, grey period during which the only green that she saw was a few tired, dusty trees surrounded by the concrete of a prison courtyard, that she had been eking out an existence outside the maelstrom of our society, at home as in some sort of abroad, behind bars, that she had long become estranged from people, that she had grown apart from them and turned into a raven, that she

was the embodiment of loneliness, flying under heavy night clouds, that she really was a raven woman, which might explain why her face seemed so unnatural and so delicate, as if her spirit were leaning out of her real face: I felt that if I blew on her with the full force of my lungs, she might shatter before my very eyes like the fluffy globe of a dandelion.

In that unusual, uncertain moment pregnant with questions, I noticed that further down the staircase below this strange woman, someone was waiting. No doubt waiting for her.

It was only then that she uttered her first words. After a silence lasting at least three minutes. Then, having waited for me to make the phone call to Vrtaik, she immediately turned to leave; I think without saying good-bye.

That woman was really unusual, though what she said wasn't actually an explicit warning about you - I don't know why I put it like that earlier, a slip of the tongue and before you know it, a long explanation is necessary, it happens to us all - so how about some red wine? Red wine suggests - for me at least - a kind of reassurance. There is something mysterious about it, its bitter notes often force us to probe ourselves thoroughly from within to ensure that we haven't yet disappeared. Yes, that's right, my dear sir. Sometimes the taste of red wine, combined with the rich aroma of dried wild mushrooms and the charred smell of freshly chopped logs from fir trees can give rise to a yearning for Christmas even in high summer. But you should start by sampling these milk-caps - they're a speciality of mine. Kirsch followed by milk-caps, and then we'll have a taste of this smoked pike. You won't regret it. And to go with it, a drop of Müller

Thurgau – the perfect accompaniment to smoked fish. Vrtiak said you were a great gourmet. Don't worry, just relax. None of this is of any consequence. Well, what do you think – I wasn't misleading you, was I? A tart, tangy and velvety bouquet – yes, that's it, exactly. What do you mean? That's a term I don't apply to gastronomy, ever. I'm sorry, I didn't catch what you said. I admit I might have called our meeting off, had that woman not looked the way she did. If it hadn't been for the way she looked, I'd have called it off. She was so peculiar that even if she'd taken an ordinary box of matches out of her handbag, I would have had my suspicions about the box. No, I don't believe in that sort of thing. Fate. Do you believe in fate? I don't. When I hear people say that fate had driven someone to do something, I... – But there's one thing I know for sure: if you come up against something mindboggling, you have found yourself at the point where, as people say, the outskirts of God begin, though not quite on the street that leads directly to Him.

I gather from how you have turned up here and, in particular, from what brought you here, that you have come expecting an experience of the utmost importance. That's what Vrtiak said, too, he said that for you this might be the most important thing of all. The most important thing in your life. This is how people make preparations for suicide, a wedding, their mother's funeral. Please don't make that face, like a wet dog that wants to rub itself on my leg. I can see you have a sense of humour. Now, let's get to the point:

Everyone has something they call their most significant memory. The most significant of all the significant ones. A memory that will never fade, come what may. Or a memory that can't be washed off like old blood stains.

The most significant memory always comes back to us unexpectedly. It startles us every now and then like the shrill ringing of an alarm clock that we didn't set, suddenly taking us aback, making us wonder why it is ringing and why now, of all times. You know the feeling, don't you? It's like a burn that healed a long time ago and is now warning you of an impending frost. How odd: why is the memory that has taken the deepest root inside us never a happy one?

So let me get to the point:

When I turned twenty-two, to be more precise I was twenty-two plus a few hours, a large gathering took place at our house. Among those who turned up - or rather, who suddenly remembered my existence - were not only my friends from the printing works, my old schoolfriends, girls from the grammar school and a few close relations, but also some distant relations, the kind of extended family we can only describe as the scattered litter of some elderly sow.

Laughter, hoary anecdotes, humour patched together out of well-worn jokes, people talking about this and that. I forget what brought it on, but I remember distinctly that, all of a sudden, everyone in my family, from the closest relations to the most distant kin I had never seen before, was hell-bent on holding forth. It was a kind of boasting contest - don't get me wrong, Mr Klementini, I'm not saying there wasn't some truth to all their bragging. Absolutely not. Every single one of them, as I learned later, was telling his own truth, except that each of them squeezed it into a frame that was as tawdry as it was ostentatious, and they would all have sounded quite plausible if they hadn't been drunk, if they hadn't been flailing their arms around, if they hadn't put on such airs

and graces, if they hadn't sworn blind, hands on hearts, that they were telling the truth, and if they hadn't stroked their knees as if they belonged to the grammar-school girls sitting across the room. The only one who didn't say a word was my grandfather.

They got into almighty rows, of course, about all kinds of things. And of course, it was inevitable that each of them talked mainly about things they had experienced themselves.

I don't really remember, try as I might, how the idea came up that everyone should share the most powerful experience of their lives. Everyone clapped. And then, without further ado, someone announced – even standing up to make the announcement – that his most unforgettable experience was something that happened when he was doing his military service as a border guard near Mikulov, something that, at a stroke, had propelled him from a stripeless soldier to a corporal. And the reason it happened was that he had fired his machine gun, preventing someone from crossing the border from Czechoslovakia into Austria. With his cheeks bright red, like a TB sufferer in his death throes, he told us, all flushed, how dark that night had been. His story went something like this:

“... I tore right through him with that shot. I tore a jagged line through the man. Like a blunt pair of scissors cutting a sheet of metal. Later I saw him being dragged away. And I was promoted to corporal on the spot. I was number one in my regiment! I wish you'd seen it! You wouldn't believe where they sat me in the canteen and who I shared the table with! After midnight the colonel... (now he was stammering, overcome with emotion) said that I should read Boris Polevoy's *The Story of a Real Man*, as I was the only real man in the ranks, all the