

Jan Procházka

Translated by Mark Corner

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Translated from the Czech by Mark Corner

Afterword by David Vaughan

Published by Charles University,

Karolinum Press

Ovocný trh 5/560, Prague 1, Czech Republic

Cover and graphic design by Zdeněk Ziegler

Typesetting by Karolinum Press

First English edition

Cataloging-in Publication Data is available
from the National Library of the Czech Republic

Translation © Mark Corner, 2022

Afterword © David Vaughan, 2022

Illustrations © Jiří Grus, 2022

ISBN 978-80-246-5136-1 (pdf)

ISBN 978-80-246-5319-8 (epub)

ISBN 978-80-246-5320-4 (mobi)

ISBN 978-80-246-5135-4



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jan Procházka (1929–1971) was a Czech screenwriter and novelist. Many of his novels were inspired by or written concurrently with his screenplays. Born into a farming family in south Moravia, he studied agriculture before rising up the ranks of the Communist Party. He was the head of a youth farm, worked for the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Youth Union, and was then a member of the Central Committee for the Czech Communist Party. He began his artistic career in 1956 with his first novel, and then in 1959 became a screenwriter for Czechoslovakia's famous Barrandov Film Studios. He even became a close associate of the Communist President, Antonín Novotný during this time. In the 1960s Procházka was a leading figure in the reformist wing of the Communist Party, publishing in newspapers and revues and pointing out the failures of the regime. With the Soviet led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, he was declared a *persona non grata*, his work was banned, and he became the victim of a vicious smear campaign by the secret police who edited together tapped phone-lines to ruin his reputation. Today he is most famous as the writer behind the brilliant – and instantly banned – 1969 new wave film *Ucho* (The Ear), and other screenplays for the director Karel Kachyňa (*Kočár do Vídně, Noc nevěsty*). *Ucho* has been adapted into a TV play (1983 ZDF, ORF) by Pavel Kohout and another movie *Noc bez Moci* (2015) by Ivan Trajtkov.

Anna gets out of the car in her stockings and steps onto a damp pavement at night. Her shoes felt too tight, so she's holding them in her hands. Her bag is slung over her shoulder. She is dressed in a long evening gown looking like a sack. She has a fox fur round her neck and uses a bare elbow to press a crumpled shiny raincoat against her waist. She is singing a Slovak song. Whenever she's tipsy, she takes to singing.

'Put your shoes on,' he says. His mild tone is almost soothing. Which is not quite how he's feeling.

'Don't speak to me!' Irritation courses through her at every word he speaks. 'Be so kind as to leave me in peace. Got that?'

She turns away from him to the car.

'Wherever did I put that hat of mine?'

She is all affability talking to the chauffeur. 'You can't leave me here all hatless, Vlad.'

She always addresses chauffeurs as if they're part of the family.

She has been kneeling on the edge of the back seat with her head back inside the car. Broad calves lead to ankles spread wide. These stay on the street. Bending forward amplifies her figure. Ludvík turns away. Moves at speed across the pavement. Takes a good look around. But they are the only ones in the street. Two rows of trees grow along the pavement. Shiny in the trunk. Maybe beech.

He is now standing in front of the gate of the little villa. He tries the handle. Finds it locked.

He realises that he knew all along it would be locked. Feels in a trouser pocket. Then in the other pocket. Then with both hands at once in his two jacket pockets. Removes the raincoat draped over his shoulder, holds it in one hand and feels in it with the other.

'Could you get the keys from your handbag?'



'Sod off,' she replies. Without so much as throwing him a glance. She lays out the cape, handbag, shoes and a bouquet of roses on the garden wall. She has a paper hat back on her head now.

The car drives off. It fades into the distance at great speed.

'You locked it.' He heaves a sigh. 'You were the last to leave the house. I was already sitting in the car when you came out.'

'That's your problem. You know what your problem is...? The beastly way you behave! Going out of the house first before me! Leaving me to follow in your wake like a dog! Is that something to brag about?'

All the same she opens her handbag. And rummages inside.

'I haven't got them. I know what's in there and what isn't. I haven't lost my wits yet.'

About fifty yards away a black limousine is hugging the kerb. It seems to have appeared in the street without a sound.

It has switched off its sidelights. A standard issue government limousine. Just like the car that brought them. No one gets out of it.

Ludvík notices the limousine.

'You were wearing a cape. You must have put them in its pocket.'

He is talking to empty air.

Anna is loafing around on the edge of the pavement in her stockings. No one can mistake what she's up to. Something a woman has to pull up her skirt to do.

'Have you gone mad...?' he hisses at her. 'There's people over there.'

She has pulled up the long skirt to mid-thigh.

'You mean that car...? The one with the lights out? Who would be there...? Who would sit in a car without any lights on?'

The car has suddenly begun to back away. Without putting the headlights on. A tyre can be heard scraping against the kerb.

Anna stops what she's doing.

Lowers her dress. Turns round.

'Do you think they were playing away from home?'

Just her style of question.



The officer is wearing white gloves.

He opens the car door for them.

He salutes.

Ludvík greets him formally with 'Hail to labour!'

In her long skirt Anna emerges very awkwardly. In the event she has to hold it up. Her handbag falls to the ground. 'If one green bottle should accidentally fall...' She laughs as she sings. Without a moment's hesitation the officer hands over the bag.

He gives Ludvík a parking permit.

'One one seven', he informs him.

He gives the same number to Jindřich. Jindřich has driven them over.

'Have a good time!' He gives them a nod from the car.

They are already on their way up...

By way of the marble staircase...

Along the expensive carpet...

Between pots of ivy. And flunkies on guard.

'None of you come here, go there, stay in line, no more wine,' Anna is saying. Out loud. 'Understood? I'm not your little fool. Ready to be shouted at all evening.'

'Don't you know how to speak quietly?' he asks.

Doormen in livery open the dazzling white and gilded doors in front of them...

Anna is going through the pocket of the cape.

'An orange!' she says and gives a snort. 'I pinched one!'

She's standing on one leg. With the instep of the other she's rubbing her calf.

'How is it that I don't have those keys...?'

'How would I know.'

'Today of all days you could stop being so down in the mouth. Agreed? Today of all days! When you've got a moment, why don't you look at the calendar!'

'At the calendar... Why at the calendar?'

'If you look at the calendar, the penny might drop. For a huge brain like yours.'

She has given up the search.

'I don't have them. Are we just going to stand around? Shall we sleep out here? Or are you going to do something? We've got a bell, haven't we?'

She presses the doorbell.

She listens. If it works, somebody should be able to hear it.

There is no sound.

'It's not working...?'

She turns to Ludvík.

'I need to take a leak. Or I'll wet myself.'

He starts to shimmy up the wall.

'For all I care... fill your pants if you must...!'

'You don't need to spell it out for me! Really, you don't need to spell it out at all. I know you don't give a damn about what I do. I've known that long enough! You don't care a fig about me! I'm not too soft in the head to know that!'

He hauls himself over the top.

Still adroit, he is already standing on the small roof over the gate and breathing heavily from exertion.

'How could you spend the whole evening talking to that Cejnar? When you say yourself that he's a fathead. Any idiot will do for your idle chatter, but you obviously can't spare a moment for me. You couldn't care less that I had to stand around abandoned for hours...'

The glow from the chandeliers falls on everything like a sprinkling of flour. He passes by a Venetian mirror. In the glass surface he looks sick and swollen. Red around the eyes. Someone he knows appears in the mirror.

‘I’m looking for Anna.’ He has to say something.

Then he sees Anna. Just where he’s heading. Standing with a bunch of women. All wearing paper hats. They’ve put numbers on them with lipstick. They’re laughing about it.

He swings round at once.

So she won’t catch sight of him.

A bit further on he repeats the lie to someone else: ‘I’m looking for Anna.’

He launches himself and drops down from the wall into the garden with a thud, his hands landing on the lawn.

He's landed in a molehill or worse. It's all over the palms of his hands. He wipes them on the grass.

Anna hears his steps in the garden.

As he moves away.

'Wake up, Ludi!' She calls out to Ludvík. 'The other set's hanging in the kitchen.'

She takes out a handkerchief. Blows her nose. Moves away from the gate.

Goes to the wall. Puts on her cape. Takes her things which are falling onto the pavement. Gathers a slapdash bundle into her arms.

Now that she's alone, tiredness has caught up with her.

The empty street is uninviting.

From the house comes the sound of Ludvík whistling. The same warble over and over again. A muffled call.

There's the sound of a pebble against glass.

'Go on, break the window!' She is speaking in an undertone.

She goes back to the gate.

More out of embarrassment than anything else, she tries the handle.

The gate opens!

Anna is not surprised.

'We are all idiots,' she says. 'Only you are a genius!'

She uses her knee to close the gate.

From the inside.

And tries to bolt it. With her elbow.

Finally, she manages it.

She has laid all her things on a little cement pathway running between the flowerbeds. Bending forward, she takes a cigarette out of her bag. Then a lighter. She tries to get a flame from the lighter. Gives it a shake. With her

head by her knees, not realising the awkwardness of her position. Spits at it three times. For luck. This time a real flame flares up. For a moment Anna's face is lit up by its glow. The open pores of her bad skin. Which come to any blonde of a certain age. Visible traces of powder round the nose and eyes.

She straightens up. Inhales smoke greedily.

'Ludvík!' She calls to the house. Her fit of pique has passed. 'The window of the laundry room might be open.'

He jumps. The window is high above the ground. His hand has slipped off the ledge.

There's shrubbery and lots of twigs by the wall. Ludvík is fighting his way through the undergrowth in the darkness. Anna is calling the lad from the other side of the house.

'Ludi!'

'Sleeping like a log,' says Ludvík. Sounding furious.

He keeps trying. Manages to get a hold. With both hands. Succeeds in putting his weight on his knees. It's hard work. He's in his best trousers and they're tight. He bangs his head on the top of the window-frame. For a split second it looks like he'll lose his grip and fall back into the shrubbery. But he's managed to get his trunk across the window-sill. For a moment he relaxes in this position.

Anna arrives. She's come crashing through the undergrowth. Stands in front of Ludvík.

'Why did you have to climb over the gate? It wasn't locked.'

He turns his head.

'Can't you get rid of the fancy dress?'

He's referring to her paper hat.

'You're looking at me? That's something for the record books...'

'What's unlocked?'

'I don't know what it's called. It's metal, is commonly found in the fence, you use it to get from the street into the garden...'

Anna's mood is unchanged.

'Bullshit!'

'You haven't spoken like that here in a long time. Makes me wonder what I've been missing. How else could I have got here? Over the fence? Me? In this skirt...? Use your head,' she says.



'You don't have to be the only one using language like that,' she continues. 'You could be on the receiving end of it.'

He slithers forward heading indoors. Pressing sore knees against the window ledge.

Anna talks without removing the cigarette from her mouth. She's looking between the trees. At the villa next door. Its lights are on.

'Klepáč arrived from Moscow the day before yesterday. Their blinds were down till today. They haven't even been at the reception. He's been away for a month but when he comes back the Klepáč woman knows that she has a real man there.'

He slides further in.

Grabs hold of something inside.

'I've got washing hanging up. Don't break the clothes line.'

He's just broken it.

'Wouldn't think of it,' he says.

His body is off balance. He can't avoid what's happening.

He's fallen over.

Something inside collapses with a clatter.

It takes him a while to find his bearings.

Lying among pots and rags. In a pile of spilt washing-powder. Surrounded by specimens of Anna's underwear.

'When there is freezing..you understand? Freezing...?'

'Yes, yes,' he hears himself say in Russian. 'I say only a little, but I understand everything.'

'That's good.' The general is pleased.

The mixed party of Czechs and Russians have glasses in their hands. A Czechoslovak major is obligingly replacing a Soviet general's empty glass. With a full one. A Baroque majolica stove stands behind them. A huge painting by Brožík dominates the wallpaper.

'How nicely they offer us their welcome,' a young woman says.

She's a member of the general's party.

'We receive such hospitality in Brno. In Bratislava, and in Closetse...!'

'Košice,' one of the Czech women corrected her.

'A dreadfully nice reception...'

The woman makes the general a little nervous. He turns to face Ludvík.

'When the frost lies heavy...! Comrade Deputy minister!'

His forehead juts out in front of a shiny skull. 'I mean when it's twenty, thirty degrees below...'

He takes a drink. All at once the glass is empty.

'Can you still lay foundations...?'

'He is asking whether we can use cement in frost,' the major translates for Ludvík.

'I can follow him,' says Ludvík. 'Of course I know what he's saying.'

The waiter replaces the general's empty goblet.

The Russian raises his eyebrows.

'What a people!' he says. 'They never give a soldier any respite here.'

'When there's a frost,' Ludvík searches for the right words 'we cannot fabricate in this country.'

'It's not possible to lay foundations in a frost,' says the major, finding other words.

'Oh!' The general expresses his surprise with a sigh. 'That is unfortunate.'

'Iglava'. The Russian woman is still trying to count off Czech towns. 'Pilzena'.

'Plzeň!' the general suggests to her. 'Beer!' he adds with a laugh. Everyone has joined in the laughter.

'We can lay foundations in a frost! You should come and see them! Take a tour! And you are from...?'

'From Mohelnice.'

'Mogelnice', says the Czechoslovak major. 'Our 'h' is a 'g' in Russian. It's a what do you call it, administrative district, the Gana - Hana - area', explains the major to the general. 'Mogelnice the townlet is part of it. Mogelnice is a kind of town, isn't it?'

'It's a town,' says Ludvík.

'Who cares anyway'.

'You must come and visit us,' the general repeats. 'You absolutely must.'

He's looking at the stucco ceiling.

As if his mind is elsewhere.

'You haven't appointed a minister for the building industry?'

'Yes, we have,' says Ludvík. 'Why wouldn't we have one? The comrade minister is Košara.'

The general raises his eyebrows.

'But our people have informed me there is a vacancy at the moment...!' he says, looking surprised.

'He should be right here,' says Ludvík as he looks around. 'He must be somewhere.'

'He's sent his apologies,' says a young man.

This is the first time the young man has opened his mouth.

Ludvík doesn't know who he is.

'What do you mean, he's sent his apologies?'

The young man is already on the way out.

'Let's have a toast!' says the general. 'In the way soldiers do.'

He raises his voice. Tries to find the right words. 'In the way Czechs do!' he bawls.

The young Russian woman squeals with enthusiasm and claps.

'Face about...! Arms present...!' He is proud of having remembered the words in Czech. Clinks glasses with Ludvk. With gusto. Wine gets splashed. Fortunately, it's white wine.

He knows where the switch is. Shuffles over to it. Turns the switch. Still in the dark.

'Someone's blown the fuses again.'

Anna is standing outside. In front of the open window.

'I'm curious whether you said something to him. He took a coil from the radio. Did he say anything to you about taking a radio coil?'

'Well...something like that.'

'Stop lying! When did he mention it to you? When? When you last saw him? That was a week ago. If anyone spoils him, it's you.'

Ludvk has already opened the door.

Onto a narrow staircase.

He feels for the wall with his hand and goes upstairs. In darkness.

Leaves the door wide open.

Fingers touch against another switch. He turns it. But still no light comes on.

'The little scoundrel,' he says.

There's another switch in the hall.

Ludvk tries this switch too. Just as useless.

He fumbles in his pockets. Pulls out a lighter. Having got hold of the lighter, he finds cigarettes. First of all he lights one.

Keeps the lighter on. Carries the small flame over to an alcove...

Where the fuses are.

Moves the light from one fuse to another.

Tightens them with his free hand. But none of them seems to be loose.

No fuses blown. He unscrews one all the same.

Examines the wires. Nothing wrong with the fuse.

Goes once again to turn the switch.

In the kitchen. Nothing.