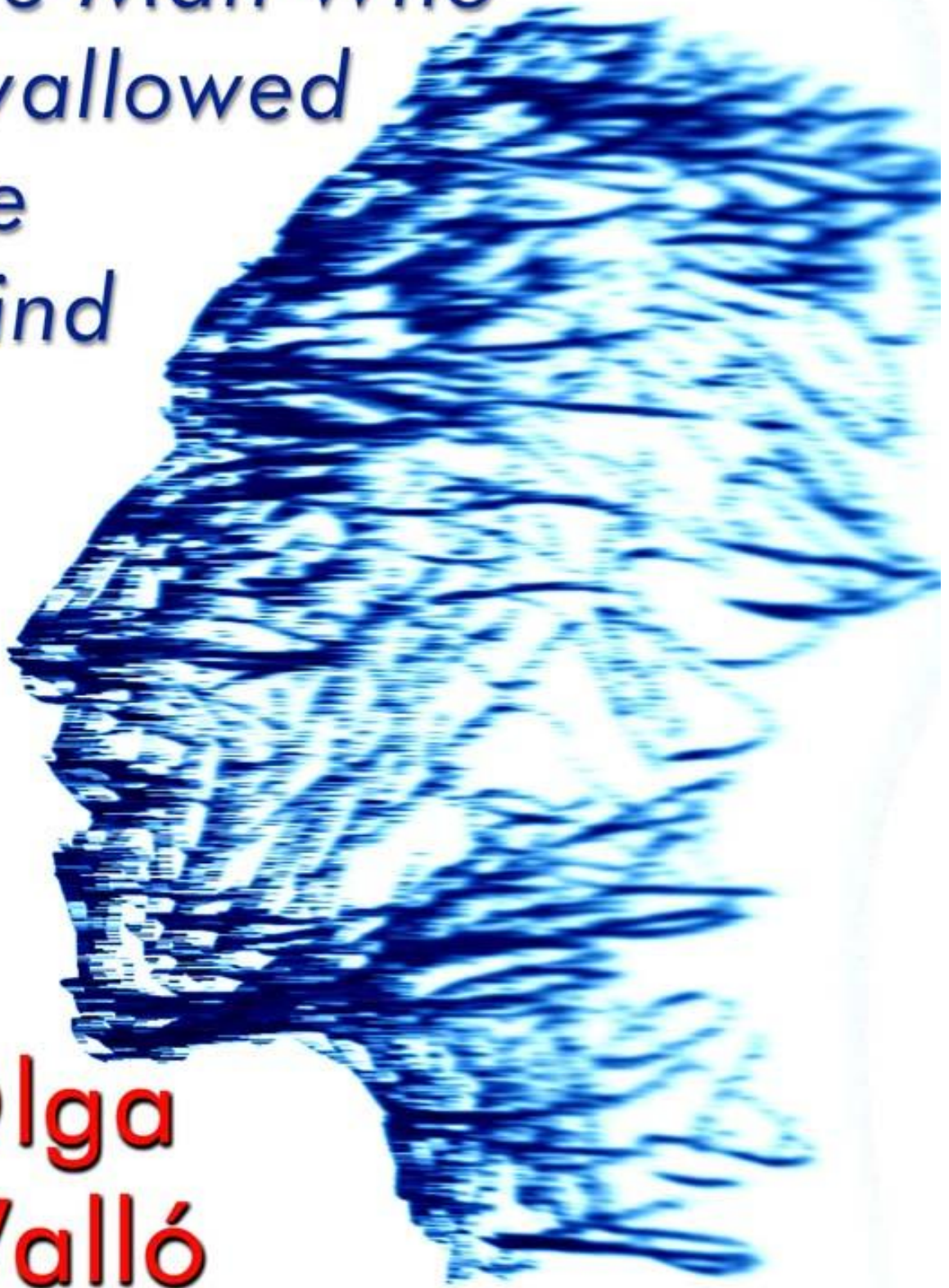


*The Man Who
Swallowed
the
Wind*

**Olga
Walló**



The Man Who Swallowed the Wind



Olga Walló

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This book was a wonderful opportunity for me to get an education in modern Czech history and the Czech language in an unconventional manner. It was a long journey, but one that I would repeat without a moment's hesitation.

I thank to Zuzana Stern for her translation of the verses in the book.

I particularly owe a huge debt of gratitude to Stázi Jakubcová, whose unremitting help and advice enabled me to reach the end of the book.

Stázi,

“I can no other answer make but thanks,
And thanks, and ever thanks...”
(Shakespeare, Twelfth Night)

James Khoury, translator

The reader will encounter footnotes in the text. The author points out that they may not be factual but they are significant.

FIRST ROUND

1. LONE SOLDIER STANDING IN THE FIELD

- I.
- II.
- III.
- IV.
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- VI.

2. THE PATHS TO THE FATHER

- I.
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3. THE DESCENT OF THE HOLY GHOST

- I.
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5. A STONE FROM THE TOP

- I.
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- I.
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- I.
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III.

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KISSED THE BOYS AND MADE THEM CRY

I.

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I.

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I.

II.

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I.

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SECOND ROUND

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I.

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20. SWANS, AT ALL COSTS

I.

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22. A MEXICAN FAIRY TALE, PART ONE

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EPILOGUE

FIRST ROUND

1. LONE SOLDIER STANDING IN THE FIELD

I.

A delightful and comforting scene; the Easter sun is extracting anemones from the grass and interlacing on the green sward in front of the Palace with white frontage are a snake of children. They are holding hands and singing in chorus:

Sol-fa-mi-re-mi-do-re-fa-mi-re-sol-sol
Sol-fa-mi-re-mi-do-re-fa-mi-re-do-do
Sol-fa-mi-re-mi-do-re-fa-mi-re-sol-sol
Sol-fa-mi-re-mi-do-re-fa-mi-re-do-do

Separately the small blue-eyed blonde boy intones cleanly, his distinctive voice ascending and descending with certainty and gusto. A big dark lad leads the line and laughs with undisguised pleasure.

*“Jól kibaszott velünk a szentkúti búcsú.
Ellopták a kocsink, ellopták a lovunk.
Nem maradt más nekünk, csak az apánk fasza.
Azt kantárotuk fel, azzal mentünk haza.”¹*

Helen Mařatková radiates, she is taking in only the melody. It is just how she imagined. Her reception could not have passed off any better. A true Easter holiday; folk songs, tradition...

Helen Mařatková doesn't know Hungarian, but is otherwise appropriately qualified. She has just assumed the role of director of the children's home. The title orphanage has for a long time not been used! Plus many of these children are not even orphans. Some have mothers... poor things. She, Helen, will be more than that to them: she will be their comrade. And in that word is everything. It is 1952. Soon she will be thirty and now she has her big opportunity. And these children with her!

“Realize, that you are lucky. Very, very lucky. This organization offers you the best, the absolute best, that could in the world be offered to you. Collective education. You can develop in a collective team. You now have a huge privilege, that you can grow up without... without...” Here Helen stammered a little. She had never been a big speaker. But she fostered on through her burning passion. “...prejudices. There's no one here to corrupt you. From you can emerge new people...”

The children's faces looked on at her dully. The jaw of the big lad, who had so distinctively sung – or perhaps rather shouted, dropped. His eyes bulged, bloodshot like an apathetic cocker-spaniel.

He must be mentally retarded... at least a little, Helen thought. She herself had a simple, and simply ugly face, as if made from potatoes.

She wanted to get it across to them that here they had an advantage ahead of everyone else and that they should therefore be proud of themselves. And also that they had grand role-models, who would enable them to... but for that, there would still be time. Gradually. Every day. They would understand. They were mouldable – they had to be. Perhaps they already understood it better than her new subordinates. Today there were here only two tutors, they alternate. Emma – the elder – was looking at her exceedingly peculiarly. The poor beanpole, she stood taller than Helen by a good half metre... while at the same time looking on her submissively from below. Andula – the younger, was thickset, zits bursting. She had a vile complexion and badly bleached hair.

“We'll start again. Together, children. We all together. You will address me as 'Comrade'. 'Comrade Director' is correct, but you don't have to use this. Comrade is enough.”

She hadn't noticed the uncompromising drill sergeant undertones in her oration. She registered a flash of inherent repulsion and uncertainty.

“You still don't understand what an honour it is for you, but it doesn't matter... you will learn. I myself will teach you. To be a comrade is a huge honour. It is not garnered without merit... To your 'aunts' you can in the meantime say 'Aunt'.” She concluded her speech almost defiantly.

The small blond boy who had sung so nicely knew better. He also did not understand Hungarian, but to him it was obvious that in that song there must be some trick. Otherwise Laco wouldn't have taught it so wildly.

1

*We'll walk home, screw the market
One guy nicked our horse, another stole the carriage
We don't have but shit, and father's prick
if I tried to ride it, the tether wouldn't fit him.*

(Hungarian folk song)

Whoever was too slow was a fucking useless little shit-stain. Laco pinched. He also knew how to take one hand under your neck and pull you up onto your tiptoes, till you turned blue and choked. It is a ridiculous feeling, Laco also wouldn't necessarily have to let go in time. Ivan himself had memorized these strange foreign words immediately... it was simple; it was much better to get on well with Laco.

When the organized free time in the garden finished they returned back up to the first floor. The tutors as usual were going last. He stopped on the stairway and waited for her

"Aunt Emma..."

"What is it, Ivan?" Emma, a tall and slim female, beamed at him. He was standing on a higher step, their face met at one level and she unashamedly radiated with tenderness.

"Would you prefer me to call you 'Comrade Aunt' or 'Aunt Comrade'?" he asked in a serious and obliging voice.

"Don't fool around, Ivan!" she said sternly. The boy could smell the aroma of her armpits. Aunt Emma always wore grey or brown jumpers, so that dirt could not be seen. Princesses are not to be sniffed at, let alone nuns. Nobody had ever cared for her enough to inform her of this... one of the many small tragic stories.

Emma had plenty of motherly instincts, though the last beats of her biological clock were painfully fading away. She was a simple person and to her bad luck she had never had a trace of a sense of humour, so even she had failed to appreciate what the new director was stressing in her speech: that in the current historical epoch, to be a cast-off off shoot of the lumpenproletariat, or at least an anonymous orphan without a family, was the absolute best – a real scoop, a unique chance to him dodge his past, not to succumb temptations, to create himself together with his buddies, to become a real, valid human being...

To be an orphan, it was evident, was perhaps occasionally good. But on the other hand, care for orphans was an unrewarding thing, this Emma knew for a fact. And this the comrade director would also come to know, if she still didn't know it. Whoever decided with an honest heart to dedicate themselves to this profession, would soon get shaken up. Deprived descendents of antisocial can be lovely little bastards!

Of course, not Ivan. He was obedient and neat and tidy and also went to a normal primary school, not to a special needs one like most of these hopeless urchins.

Ivan was called that because he was born in June, on the day of his patron saint. He would not have himself have known about this patron saint, but Aunt Emma had told him about it when he had there for the first time celebrated his birthday. They had transferred him there at the start of the year, in which school was obligatory. When Emma saw him, something in her immediately clasped. He 'fell into her eye' as they say, but this was something more: as though he had gone through her eye and fell as far as under her collarbone and all the way to her breast.

"Happy birthday, Ivan!" was boomed out badly by the choir of children, because, in the tradition of establishments in the solid First Republic, it went so. And Ivan got on his plate an extra portion of pudding. But that was as special as it got, for in that home there were perhaps sixty children and so someone constantly had a birthday, sometimes also two or three all at once.

"But you will save, Ivan dear, you'll see, when you grow up. It will do you good," declared Aunt Emma. She had summoned him after dinner into her room and given him a genuine present, wrapped in a box with a bow.

"For your birthday you got... but you know... you have this for your name. You also have today your name day, you know? Saint Ivan... but now name days aren't celebrated – so I thought..." and she gazed at him imploringly.

"Thank you very much, Aunt Emma." He took the box and smiled at her. He was so well-mannered, but Emma was actually a little disappointed.

"So go and enjoy it in good health," she said timidly.

He hesitated with the object in his hand. Everyone would see that he was carrying something – where to hide it? He didn't know. He hadn't been here very long. It was already his fourth children's institute.

"Wait..." she stopped him. "You won't even have a look at what I gave you?"

He understood and untied the bow. On one piece of cotton wool was lying a fountain pen with the brand name *Student*. In that year it would have cost 10 crowns and Aunt Emma earned 660 crowns a month. But that Ivan didn't know. He honestly didn't know what it was. The next step, however, he did know.

"Thank you very much, Aunt Emma," he repeated quietly. He had blue-green eyes, but they didn't even sparkle.

"You know what?" she said, because she knew. "Leave it here with me... until you go to school in Autumn. Then you can use it. In the meantime, you'll know that you have it here with me."

"Thank you very much, Aunt Emma," he repeated for the third time and she pushed him out the door. She didn't think anything. She rarely thought something explicitly. But it was a powerful feeling.

II.

She knew about him, only what was written in his personal file, which was extremely thin. Ivan Doseděl, male, birth weight, a couple of medical reports, a couple of documents about transfers, why did they have to move him around so much? The Infant's Institute – an institute for children aged from one to three years – this was logical, but then a Military hospital? Why? And then yet again in Prague? Before coming here? Regarding his mother, in the papers there was nothing.

He was probably named by the doctor who had delivered him on the day of Saint Ivan, Emma concluded, hmm, a discarded child. It was 1946 when he arrived into the world in Birth Sanatorium, Břevnov, such a respectable institution, no kidding!

His mum was certainly not called Mrs. Doseděl. In the swanky hospital there had either been an almighty fuck-up in the documentation or, lord knows, they were trying to cover up something. In her profession Emma was no stranger to such entries into the world.

In some senses he was the ideal child as could have been imagined to make a childless couple happy for a couple of years: a healthy lad, fully developed with all fingers and toes and without any sense of defect; the classic blue-eyed pure blooded Nordic Caucasian reminiscent of the plump satisfied baby from early Nestle ads.

And yet, he had not been adopted. It hadn't even been discussed. There had to be something in that... something...

It crossed Emma's mind that she was actually grateful for this *something*. She caught herself with this perception: She ran her hand across his face; skin touched skin. Her hands were jaded and the complexion under her glasses had already started to wither.

Of course she loved children; she wouldn't have otherwise taken such a job, right? But there were so many of them and they are what they are and it had been so many years... About this Emma was completely honest with herself. Most of the time it was difficult to love them – and be fair and to love all of them equally, it simply wasn't possible at all.

"It's simply an operation, and an operation requires discipline, discipline which induces mental stability, which in turn brings about a fair approach. We'll approach it in a roundabout way, this is a poor-quality population, but this can only be thought, not everything a be said aloud, Em, humanity is work," said the old fat director. Before they fired him. Not fired, replaced. The cadres were superseded. And this new one in his place; no doubt it'll be quite a present.

Emma didn't even know, how it was with the old man. Had he apparently died? She had similarly never really understood him much. And of his death she actually wasn't particularly sorry. There was such an unacknowledged bitterness in her. The director was certainly a womanizer, when the opportunity presented itself, he was not averse to smacking someone's behind. However, at Emma, as a woman, he had never given a second glance.

Unfortunate love is much more prevalent in the world than its opposite. Ivan by and large noted that towards him Aunt Emma had a special relationship. When he had been ill and lying in the infirmary, she had brought him afternoon custard. And, on top of that, preserved pears, which Ivan loved. This does not necessarily imply that Ivan should reciprocate with the same intensity, it is not connate with him. Somewhere in himself he had huge stores of independence. Perhaps he had been born with it. Or maybe he discovered it when lying and staring infinitely at the matt white ceiling. He was never alone, save within himself. Soon he would learn to label that as well, for sure he knew that learning is easy. School was good. For his end-of-year assessments, he would again have straight 'A's right across the board. When he arrived for the first time with credits which the attending governess had to sign, Aunt Emma swept him off to the staffroom and placed him on a footstool in front of her.

Aunt Emma was a short-sighted beanpole. She alternated between glancing myopically into his pupil's book at then at him and then she started crying at kissed him. She mumbled to him a thank you and to keep up the good work and that he was her only pleasure in the world, then proceeded to blush while her nose started to run.

"Holy fuck, she practically wets 'erself over yer when she sees yer in the corridor, how d'yer do it, yer bastard? Your penis golden or what? Mate, if only I could borrow it..." sighed Laco Bacsí from above him, a tall gangly lad with a hare-lip.

Ivan' inexperienced ears heard this question put quite differently. Not golden admittedly, but he did have a pen. How did Laco know about it? Since his first year he had owned a fountain pen with the mark *Student*. He had got it from Aunt Emma as a present for his name-day, it was his and his only, and he was rightfully proud of it. But in eight years of his life he had already been in four institutions and he had learned consequently, that it was dangerous to get too attached to possessions.

"I'll lend it to you, Laco! Don't you worry! But only to you."

Laco erupted in laughter, spluttering onto his tracksuit top.

III.

Whoever wants to survive, must know how. To create for oneself and defend one's own space. That's how it is. The world is, of course, so confined that this space does not necessarily need to be, external, where it would with a bang collide with the vociferous spaces of other people.

Ivan has gradually learned to turn his perspective within himself. It's difficult to guess what he is at that moment thinking – and if he is thinking something which can be articulated. Found there – occasionally with feelings not dissimilar to an adventurous shiver – is a gravely dense formation of dumpling dough-like substance. Like anyone else who has ever attempted to mould this substance into categorized formations², he naturally discovers that several of these categories were already firmly imprinted in his head at the dawn of life. And he will struggle to rid himself of them.

Thanks to early schooling, which Ivan is getting through the care of Helen Mařatková, one of the moulded forms in his head became the confrontation of classes. The dialectic of historical materialism has imprinted itself so deeply in him that he doesn't even realize how spontaneously he is using it.

One social class is always persecuted, and it is this one which is historically in the right. In the end it will win, but the devil knows when; some other time, when hell freezes over. The victory is inevitable – so is it really necessary for them to slog away too much? It'll happen regardless! No doubt it will only be temporary, which is perhaps better not to dwell on too much! And what then? Chiasm of history? Naturally, people do not know too much about this, they are feeling around and getting stuck. But to understand is important. Because it is important to survive.

That's how it is. No more, no less.

That he himself belongs, if anywhere, to the lowest class, Ivan doesn't doubt. His first view of the world was the cracked white ceiling floating high above him. In the corners there were repeatedly whitewashed, and consequently disfigured, indistinct stucco details and traces of cobwebs. Every face which stopped by him, descended down to him. And on the occasions that they lifted him up from the cot, to which he had been assigned, it would never be up as far as their eye level – never up to their face.

As long as he can remember, he has never felt truly cold and he has never been truly hungry. In light of his later historical studies, it could be said that he has had it damn good. The state of his stomach and abdomen, that soft complicated area, was his utmost priority and one to which he was thoroughly devoted from the very first moment, with complete and absolute attention. It was the *be-all and end-all* to him. His stomach was his soul mate. It is his own, it never bullshits him and never plays tricks on him. Such is its character – strange, but which Ivan quite understands – that it somehow never gets completely full. For a long time Ivan himself hadn't felt hunger, for he didn't particularly enjoy sucking down something from an annoying rubber teat – but his stomach was not yet content to purr and stretch like a satisfied cat. And when it was content, Ivan was content! Only, occasionally he needs help.

Whoever drinks, must belch. The sooner the better in order not to hold up the nurses. Such a belch is purely a social act. If Ivan left it to his stomach to act only when it deigned to, it would be... Ivan didn't know how it would turn out. But he was definitely afraid to take the risk. He wanted to be a nice, decent toddler. In that cot he was already managing a lovely smile. You see something other than the ceiling, and so you draw apart your lips. He realized briskly enough that he shouldn't smile at each and every person. He must choose. Because a smile is not only a learned reflex; it is... a thing of strategic importance. Later, when words come, he'll call it a weapon and shield.

Because Ivan not only takes care of himself, but also his stomach. And it is a little sod. There is an eternal slight void. As if it was even gently blowing within him.

"It's drafty here, isn't it?" said one of the old hags, for whom he hadn't a name, as they bustled around the cage-like cribs with a rag on a broom reeking of disinfectant. Perhaps she was actually quite young, but the age of the others Ivan will learn to distinguish only when he himself starts to get older. The broom had a long handle and when the old one hag left, the ventilator under the high ceiling never stayed open. The bottles of disinfectant were scattered around the floor. The air above had a texture and even a tinge of left-standing mashed carrot. The windows were also white, whitewashed to such an extent that it was impossible to see anything through

² How one venerable professor of the Philosophy faculty at Charles University, Prague in a class on the basic fundamentals would explain/introduce the thought processes of Immanuel Kant to aspiring pedagogues: "And now imagine that the world is a huge beautiful sandpit. It's huge because we are small. The sand is proportionately sieved through and moist, directly tempting for playing. We'll make sandcastles! This form is space and this one is time...yes? - Never underestimate clarity, dear colleagues!"

them. From the air vent – if it was open – cold strands of air would occasionally descend which were worth examining. It was possible to absorb it, to have a sniff, a taste, and then gulp it down. Ivan would eagerly turn his chin towards it, snatch at it, and send it down to his stomach. It was pleasant for both him and his stomach. The swallowed air tickled so.

To the left and to the right of him, occasionally shuffling around, babies similar to him lay there in rows. From time to time there would be a small whimper, seldom a real cry.

“These kids don't even scream much. They know that there's no point...”

The first truths are steadfastly simple. Children fix their eyes on the handle of a window. It's solid, nicely twirled, interesting. It would be good to grasp it and suck it. Properly relish the brass. Only it's too far away. The child then protracts all four paws, opens its mouth, tongue wagging. In the corner saliva is appearing. Perhaps it has a guardian angel: instead of deprivation syndrome from lack of stimulation, they develop the capability of imagined satisfaction.

On the tongue it tastes of metal. Or at least it seems like this taste, somewhat chillingly penetrating. He hears in himself an approving response. His stomach has concluded that all is well.

IV.

It beneficial to be nice. It requires only the ability to know when to display it. For example to read well. Whoever sees Ivan with a book lavishes praise on him. Fewer and fewer people are reading these days, and even Aunt Emma would rather knit than read. It's a treasured activity, exclusive only to some, and, as Ivan discovered from the moment he managed his very first letter, so easy and entertaining!

And what is bad in the eyes of the aunts? Helen Mařatková, the Comrade Director, is going beyond the bounds of her workload, already going through inappropriate institutional publications with the children.

“We're going to organize a voluntary working group, we're getting rid of this rubbish!” she declared excitedly. “The collection of old papers is a responsibility of the new modern age! And you'll be getting points towards the competition!”

The books were lying on the ground, then carried on a wheelbarrow by the older boys to be dumped in the scrapyard. They got money for it, but they were not allowed to keep it. A warden who went with them shoved the money into his pockets. What remained for them was merely the validation of how many trees they were saving by these actions. They were quite pissed off by this, which was understandable to Ivan.

He himself feels bitterness, albeit for other reasons, namely not having managed to read most of those books! He had taken them for granted; he believed they had absolutely no value for the others and were waiting for him. But now all that remains is the stifling aroma of dust and plenty of space on the shelves. The emptiness resembles the void in his stomach. A dry gulp and he shifts from one foot to another.

Perhaps a little too prominently, for Helen noticed him.

“And don't you be sad,” she tells the blonde haired golden boy, this apparent calm ocean of a lad.

“I know you love books. It's nice. But don't feel regret for these! These were bourgeois schmaltz! These books lied, you know that? They deliberately lied in order to harm us! And that is bad, isn't it? They were already old! Now we've got new truths! You'll see, soon we'll get lots of new ones. And not made up, but ones which you can trust!”

“It's a joke that money is still given for them, anyway...” Laco declared broodily. “Old paper... fine! Or it would be fine if it weren't for that fucking old knob forever sniffing around our arses for dosh...”

Helen, oblivious to her own ardour, goes on debating with her wards even after dinner, when she was supposed to having some old fucker ‘massage her feet’, so they could be left to play in peace. Well that's how her attempts are perceived by Laco Bacsı; though he, naturally, expressed himself somewhat more crudely.

The Comrade Director adores the horrors of war. She speaks about them with loving affection:

“You don't realize just how lucky you are that you can now live in peace. You don't deserve this fortune, you didn't suffer for peace, you have to be worthy of it! You have no idea how many people suffered in order for you to live like this! Among us lived heroes. They suffered but they didn't betray. They were tortured. They were dying and they died... Especially the Soviet people, they suffered the worst of all. For us all they suffered... bravely and... obstinately...”

Helen is not a big speaker and the listeners in faded old tracksuits, seated in a circle around her on the floorboards, aren't taking much notice. The war had happened before they were born and since that time everything has been supposedly different. The world is now in a fundamentally different state, as though the iced armour had been penetrated; spurting out the elixir of life...

Ivan isn't sure whether or not he's sleeping; the room around him is swaying and floating. The evening is wearing on. Occasionally it's quite tricky even to sit, so droopy are his eyelids.

"Whoever was born before the victorious February³ doesn't stand a chance, children... not a chance," the ugly woman repeats to them, patiently and factually. "They will die weighed down by evil, they won't be able to shake off this burden. Any attempt is futile... The lucky ones of you will grow up into a new world..."

Ivan is leaning against a wall. Now he's certainly not sleeping; his stomach within him was tense and crying out. Ivan could hear it well. Inwardly, he was calculating. Once again he is unfortunate, he arrived in the world too soon. He's batting for the weaker team. It's close though, he's behind by a nose, but still – a good half of those faded faces around him have undoubtedly forever missed the train.

In this, the hideous woman is completely clear: that before this major watershed moment people lived in a cruel and heroic world, full of fallacy and enemies. Only in small amounts from them did a light glimmer, a star twinkle, a spark burn brightly – expressions so fixed that Ivan imagined these indescribable heroes as nymphs in a morass. Something like cursed fairies.

From the obtrusive fog enemies usually surfaced (they had long greatcoats, helmets and motorbikes with sidecars). They captured a fairy and interrogated her:

"Who are you?"

"A pixie."

"You're lying!"

Then the first wallop. And no longer will it be a pixie. It spits out a bloody tooth.

"You are a fairy! Own up! Where are the others?"

There follows an enthusiastic description of torture:

"And now imagine your nails being pulled out... and that's nothing! That's only the beginning!"

Perhaps nothing hurts fairies, otherwise they simply wouldn't be able to bear it! A proper fairy holds out, says nothing, doesn't rat on fellow fairies, dying a lengthy festering death in a cooling puddle of blood and yellowish vomit, broken, lapping up their own piss, but in spite of, still saying nothing. And if she did say something, she would be dishonourable. All fairies for one and one fairy for all! To be without honour, to be a traitor, is a shockingly horrifying means of negation.

"You really cannot imagine, how lucky you are and also how little you deserve it," Comrade Director repeats softly, and then heads towards a cunning finale: "You take it for granted that everything is now different, that now we have different values! I have here a disciplinary book, everything is written here. For any offence by an individual, the whole room will suffer! Don't think that I don't know! And what I don't know, I will find out! I could immediately freeze your points, but that would be too easy. I know it, of course... but now I want to hear it from you ...who was it?"

Now nobody is dozing, even Laco Bacsí raised a half-closed eyelid.

"Who was it of you who tried to sell *Oleg Koshevoy*?"

Ivan clutches his nostrils. A flock of half-washed brats in semi-dirty clothing would naturally mildly reek, especially having had peas for dinner. But now, having also acquired last year's air of quite another level; it stinks of shit. The real facts of the offence in question, though, are missing. Just who the fuck is Oleg? Only Ivan anticipates that is concerns a book.

"And *Young Guard*? And *Darkness*? And...."

Ivan hears how the director's voice falters with genuine... genuine horror..."

"...and *The Land, Where Tomorrow Means Yesterday* and *The Communist Manifesto*?"

Horror abates into silence.

"Do you even realize..."

Her voice has approached the borders of articulable and gasped.

"It's not only theft, it's... it's..."

From poor Helen's mouth escapes the word *blasphemy*. All of a sudden, she has no idea, how to follow with it.

"You know who it was! The one who committed this crime is an enemy to us all. And you are protecting him."

Now there is a silence, resilient and glowering.

"Shame on you! This is false solidarity!"

There is a weak tang of copper on the tongue.

"I will now go and stand in the corridor for five minutes. And between you, you will make those mangy sheep own up."

The door is shut behind her. The silence is soundproof. The unsightly woman returns.

"So once again, I'll explain it to you. You have mixed-up notions. This concerns the welfare of you all," she says quite affably and she looks around at them with a beseeching smile.

"Whoever now stands up and says who it was, will not be an informer! He will be a hero!"

³ 1948, communist coup d'état

And then it happens to Ivan for the first time. He suffers a momentary cerebral 'short'. Everything goes blue. He can see only himself, how he stands up and goes towards the woman – she isn't tall, he doesn't even have to stand on tiptoes – and gives her slap, a nice double, first with the palm and then back with the back of the hand. Smack! It cuts through the silence like a scalpel through a puss-infused ulcer.

There is still silence. Ivan hears the quiet and only then does he take fright. He is still leaning against the wall as he had been previously, his crossed legs are numb, lying on the floor next to him is Laco. Nothing had happened. Ivan looks at his hand with disbelief. If something had happened – and he would swear that it had! – nobody saw it...

V.

In year six he qualified for the regional level competition for creativity of young people in the field of Russian recitation, which wasn't especially difficult. Although the subject area was open to everyone, it was never particularly strongly assigned, and anybody capable in some way of emulating the oak barrel sounding and vibrating resonance of the Russian accent could succeed. In the home they showed the wards Russian films every second Wednesday afternoon, from a ramshackle projector operated by the spotty warden Lendl, who then, with aunt Alena in the closet on the sports mats...

Ivan had always snooped a little; knowledge brings certain privileges. But nothing any further. He holds his tongue as though he was never there. In this he is adept, it was always most simple just to trust him. The regional level competition in Russian recitation is held in the community hall of the regional committee for Prague-east. For the second time he has been allowed to go there alone.

Solitude is the greatest luxury, nobody has ever convinced him otherwise. Just to be able to go for a stroll and not be brought to book for it. Not to have to watch your back for the minutest of moments.

The institution, which for the period of school attendance is his home, stands not far from Prague, on the river in a picturesque region, which is being transformed from a previously impoverished area into a town suburb. Strewn around are decaying orbiculate churches with foundations from time immemorial, most are used as storerooms for animal feed. Travelling around them on a bicycle, and sorrowfully caressing the map-like surface created by the crumbling facades is their clerical guardian, Father František Ondříček.

Father Ondříček had a vicarage in Brodec behind the church. His gate was still not – as would happen later – boarded up with planks, and Ivan on his explorative journeys naturally found himself here. A remarkable building and for him a garden of mysteries. Whenever he came to it, it was forever closed.

Holy mass Mon-Sat: 7.00, Sun: 8.30

So it opens only for mass then. And what actually is it, this mass? In those dozen years that Ivan has been on this world, nobody has ever explained this word to him. He was aching to know what it was. Only he cannot leave the home in the mornings and on Sunday it is also forbidden. Those staying there also through the weekend have organized free time and there is always some kind of activity taking place.

So at the very least he peeks into the small window at the rear. Bits of glass in the lead frame are missing, and inside, from time to time, a ray of light pierces through. What could all that sparkling gilt, the fancy carved curved adornments around the dark pictures, be for? He had been spotted there a couple of times by Father Ondříček. He couldn't help himself; on the third occasion he lay in wait for him. He knew how to creep about silently.

"Perhaps it would interest you how it looks inside?"

Little Ivan looks at him and is silent. Or maybe he nods, but not immediately. Father Ondříček is round-shouldered and in his round face sparse light bristly eyebrows shield small tearful, but lively eyes. To a boy's eyes he has no age. He is ancient.

"So come in, I'll show you around. I'll unlock the door for you."

The church is dim and damp, but not musty or fusty, nor does it contain that well-known and well-disliked stench of too many people congregated together. It is somehow a different aroma, distant and abandoned. As if it were saying something.

Ivan doesn't know what it says to him.

"What a good boy you are," the Father declares when he sees how studiously and carefully he is proceeding around the dissected room. "Would you like to minister to me through mass?"

And immediately he laughs, in order to be certain that the boy could perchance understand it as a joke. Ivan is slightly alarmed. He understands this tone of voice.

"What is that?" he asks, and quickly adds: "please?" for he knows the role of *nice young lad* inside out and manages it line by line.

"You would help me in the service to God. Here – you see..." the Father gestures him towards the table,

above which in the dark there seems to be something elaborate. "The most mysterious transformation is arising, here we enjoy the highest blessing. Wouldn't you like to experience it too?" and again he lets out an uncertain and embarrassed laugh, as if he were retracting the previous meaning of the words. He looks innocuous. He looks as though he is afraid of Ivan.

"I'd like to," Ivan declares sincerely. "I'd like to, but perhaps I can't. I can't really do anything."

And now for a change he laughs with a humble and appellatant laugh.

VI.

So the conversation developed, before long he came again and soon everything was clear to him. He had found his father!

"Your father is God the Father Almighty," Father Ondříček told him. "He is father of us all, but we are not looking for him, we don't give a damn about him. But you were looking for him and now you have found him. Now you are no longer an orphan. He is your Father and he loves you, and he needs you and invites you to him, you know that?"

A considerable number of Ivan's co-wards actually have a mother, though particular unpleasant to the extent, that any right-minded person would say thanks, but no thanks. To have an father is a much more precious commodity, maybe quite fictitiously. Such a father is usually in prison. And what use is your old man when he's in the slammer?

Laco Bacsi comes from a wide family, about whom he recounts quite wild tales. Those who hadn't drunk themselves to death, and who hadn't stabbed someone before drinking themselves to death, had certainly hanged themselves. Laco has sisters, more than he can count. But... but Ivan never especially wanted to really hear about it.

And suddenly he couldn't give a shit about any of them, so miniscule were these polished shits.

If the Lord is his father, then Ivan is surely the son of God. That is really something. The thought of it! Ivan turns it over in his head, it's intoxicating. Those wonderful stories concerning him, Ivan, personally! Jesus, the first born son of God, wanted, naturally, to help people. Clearly a hero. And for this his own people pinched and squeezed him, and throttled him until he met his death – but he actually survived it. Because he had the Father to back him up and he was – and is – the absolute best and nobody can or will ever match him. Ivan has a father and Jesus is his brother. They are a family. His elder brother had his friends around him, the Apostles. Clearly he could have known how it would turn out. Judas squealed on him and Peter three times betrayed him. His brother suffered a strange, unlucky, terrible, stupid fate – but now he is famous. And Mary, so gentle, wise and sweet. This one isn't of course Ivan's mother, nobody has ever tried to claim it. Ivan, however, doesn't need a mother. She couldn't even have been his mother, because she was a Virgin, and somehow she couldn't shake this off...

"You know, to be a virgin is beautiful. It's a value, the highest degree of purity," says Father Ondříček, but Ivan doesn't really understand why. What about this is so astonishing? However, it soon comes to light; her mother, granny Ann, was a virgin too when she had her! Saint Ann... so self sufficient!

Ivan likes it immensely and doesn't pay attention and bursts out laughing. And Father Ondříček gets angry, he goes red like a turkey, and also loses concentration. He strikes him one, to such an extent that the boy's head flies sideways and his ears ring. And this cuff somehow persuades Ivan – no one slap is like another. It is as if Father Ondříček were telling him by this that he really cares about him and the Lord Father cares even more. Then once more it was fine as normal. And Ivan knew from that moment what has meaning and what he wanted to accomplish in life.

2. THE PATHS TO THE FATHER

I.

*How was it, fairy-tale?
The chick did stray
in the garden, by the drying hay...*

Ivan has no idea how this stupid rhyme got into his head. Surely he himself did not make it up? Perhaps there, somewhere under that white ceiling, they had had it read to them. Certainly improbable enough, but how could it have been any other way. Without a doubt Ivan doesn't remember it, which is good since good memory can also be a proper poison. For example, this rhyme continues:

*Chirp chirp,
little feet hurt*

And it is, Ivan judges, just a fucking game of mega proportions, this whiny chirping chick is just asking for a rendezvous with a roasting pan. As long as Ivan wants to follow his Father, it will better only to open his trap advisedly. And that's exactly what he wants, to learn absolutely everything about Him and do absolutely everything for Him. Maybe he could be of some help to the Father; as Ivan looks around, he's getting the impression that the Lord Father certainly doesn't have it easy.

"I have a plan for you," Father Ondříček began after some time. "But, my boy, it won't be easy. We must be *as cunning as a snake and as quiet as a dove*." And he laughed with that laugh, that one that was like he didn't actually mean it so seriously. Nevertheless, he then looked at him probingly and with hope.

"I know well that you would like to minister to me. But Ivan, you won't start this until you start at university. So it's important that you get accepted for it. After all, we don't want to ruin it immediately. If you are to study theology, you'll definitely need to pass your state examinations."

Ivan smiles. He is now one year away from completing his school studies and he can count on one hand the number of times he has dropped below *A* grade. Into his essays entitled *What I want to be when I grow up* he writes standardly and neatly:

I very much respect the education which is given to me. I would like to study at university in order to be of the utmost use to our state and socialist establishment.

It can't be any better than this for him. Until he completes the final state exams next year, the children's institution will provide him with shelter and sustenance. And then?

"The Lord takes care of us, along his path he leads us. Complicated are the paths of God," declared Father Ondříček and he then got down to work, in order to clear the way along the paths. How he did this, Ivan never quite understood, and he wasn't overly bothered by it either.

The relationship between the State and the Church – the two entwined and reciprocally overlapping power structures with distinct centres – had always been interesting, the battle over investiture attests to this. After the break-up of the Austria-Hungarian empire, it was none too easy here for the Roman Catholic church, it was as if a state led by a communist party wanted rid of it completely. In its confrontational view, it represented above all great organization from the Vatican-driven spy network.

In Czechoslovakia though, the separation of the Church from the state never happened; the state did not renounce on its commitment to take care of its ideological enemies along economic as well as social lines. The simplest situation for the state was with those who were detained immediately. However, the state wasn't radical enough, a considerable portion of the clergy remained free and had, therefore, the status of state employees. This set-up opened up here some kind of maneuverable space for pragmatic self-preservation.

In these post-war times the legal existence and also the effective operation of theological studies are, paradoxically, the piquant result of complicated trench warfare. In Litoměřice, a small town north of Prague, the theological department had now found its refuge, having been removed in 1950 from the register of departments in the prestigious Charles University, and banished altogether from Prague in 1953. It is, however, a state school and a state school completely reimbursing its expenses; being under the auspices of the Ministry for Culture and Education, which is, of course, overseen by the Ecclesiastical Department of the Ministry of the Interior, which expresses a systematic and competent interest in anyone who lectured there or registered there to study.

So what of it? He, who pays, decides, declared the state. But the Church also held on to something. Whoever wanted to take the entrance exams had to present an application signed by the custodian of his parish. Candidates would be chosen and sent out by the parish itself at their own trouble and expense. At this school, any kind of system of social or financial scholarship did not exist. Whoever successfully defended their doctoral work and graduated, obtained the title ThDr.

Functioning concurrently with the faculty in Litoměřice is also a theological seminary; the state also carries the cost of its operation. Those desiring to achieve ordination require a recommendation from the head of the seminary, discussed in its entirety by the relevant clerical department of the Ministry of the Interior. If everything goes smoothly, a state endorsement and workplace admittance are also obtained...

Father Ondříček will dispatch himself for the consultation in Prague.

"I'll level with you. I talked it over with our bishop and there are two hitches," he tells Ivan diffidently after his return. "It's a pity, Ivan dear, that you are so smart. They give priority to those – how should I say it – to those like me... simpletons." And for certainty he laughs.

"I'm not smart at all," Ivan declares. "I learn easily, but that really doesn't mean anything!"

He's right, but the father looks at him scoldingly. "Pride is a deadly sin," he remarks. "We humans are weak..."

"Even a saint sins daily seventy seven times," Ivan interjects, as if he isn't taking it seriously.

"Well, I will somehow explain that to them... The second thing is that I feel sorry for my parishioners..."

For this he has good reasons. At the start of the 1960s the regular churchgoers amounted to five inertial women, and the quiet, proud and stricken core of the childless, or the reckless. Other parishioners included the polite, unobtrusive former head pharmacist, currently a laboratory technician in a chemical factory, and the wife of the director of a sugar refinery, now a porter in a quarry. Former masters...

This meagre group were charged with sustaining Ivan for his studies and none of them could; their worn-down and patched-up elbows bearing witness to the previous depths they had already had to dig into their pockets.

And now in front of them Father Ondříček had to step forward with a request for financial assistance and regular contributions. Ivan can only lower his eyes. Unpleasant certainly, but it is the way of things. Ready money is a problem... He is not living badly, but he never has any. And he has no idea, who would have any. Someone certainly has it, but those whom Ivan knows, are living right now hand to mouth. Father Ondříček himself has a shabby cassock, and Ivan knows well with what childlike enthusiasm he clubs together the pennies. The leaking church roof will not repair itself .

"Let the roof fall down! Let it fall! The Lord will forgive me for badly maintaining His house... The Church is not just about any building, it is a living community in Christ..."

Father Ondříček was excited and when he gets excited, he is rapidly short of breath. He has to clutch his heart.

"What I have is yours. Books. My clothes too. But you must not grow too much, if you are going to fit into them."

"I promise that I won't eat too much," Ivan says and he smiles. At that moment they both sense victory.

II.

The river Elbe is – in spite of its defects – a cunning lover of fortune. It begins in a mountain meadow with a lovely view, not in a black pool in a prohibited area like the poor river Vltava. Peacefully, and unceasingly it flows across the border into East Germany and then even across the borders of the states of the Warsaw pact and into Hamburg, the starting point for a considerable amount of emigrants setting sail for America.

The whole thing is completely and absolutely unimaginable. It is beyond me, it doesn't interest me, I have no idea why I'm thinking about it, reflects a spindly youngster, who in a rare moment of freedom, had taken to walking across a causeway with textbooks under arm and a black notebook in a worn pocket. He looks fragile; he has disproportionately narrow shoulders, and the fine hair on his round skull already seems to be thinning out.

It is the year 1966 and he has already been here for four years, preparing for a clerical career. He has never before worked so hard and will never do so again. The Theological Seminary binds aspirants to the priestly programme for eighteen hours a day. The building received for this purpose from the state, which had in 1950 closed every existing diocesan seminary, was most fitting, with Austrian-like thoroughness and gloom – for ninety years it had previously been the refuge of ninety deaf-mutes.

Ivan can tolerate the disciplinary code well, for he has never known anything other than the communal bedroom anyway. Concerning his studies, he remains a good diligent student. And waiting for the theology students, as at every university, are the common core subjects: P.E., history of the labour movement, Russian language, fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism... basically that which he has been used to since early childhood. However, here they are applying themselves to these subjects somewhat more thoroughly and more responsibly in every aspect. These topics for disputation are equally as good as any other. And, according to the principles of *Get to know your enemy...* this is not a problem for him.

He will succeed. He will gain the path to his Father. He will learn everything. He has always learned everything. He will prevail over himself and his Father will make himself known to him. Ivan will recognize Him and He will open his arms to him.

"You are my key to the heavenly gates, Ivan dear," Father Ondříček would say every time, whenever Ivan would come visit him. "For you, there will be forgiveness for my numerous sins..."

Willingly he then piles into his head as much Latin and Greek as he can fit, with extra smidgens of Hebrew and as much of Thomas Aquinas and novotomism as the State Supervising Committee permits. Furthermore, the *trinity theology*, which is the doctrine of the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost and the teaching about Christ, which is the doctrine of the one, whose brother he is; and *pneumatology*, about the Holy Ghost; and *harmatology*, about sins and redemption; and *soteriology*, about salvation; and *eschatology*, about the last artifacts of a person; and *sacramental theology*, which is the teaching of sacrament; and *angelology and demonology*, which concerns the invisible world...

Together with Father Ondříček Ivan did simply whatever could be done in order for him to study all of the doctrines and he jumped into it with both feet. He wanted to be something worthy to his Father!

Unfortunately he comes to realize that he meets oft circular proves there. He mulls over it uncomfortably from time to time, having no one to confide in. Perhaps he shouldn't trouble himself so much about it.

Ultimately, belief is mystery and mercy.

"And this is what you must accept, dear Ivan. Faith is mystery and mercy."

Father Ondříček was always stating this sentence as though it was an undertaking; he drew his teeth together and at the same time puckered his lips and fixed his eyes almost desperately on Ivan. He served God proportionately to circumstance and at his place he remained until he died a natural death from heart disease, something which many of his colleagues at that time were unable to accomplish.

Father Ondříček died the previous year and Ivan has as yet been unable to mourn his death. He doesn't even have the impression of being anymore more alone. That is unless it is possible to name this vague uncertain inkling where his days seemed to be spinning in circles. It was as if his head had ice cold finger running through it.

On top of that he is not in any way convinced that he will eventually reunite with Father Ondříček in heaven. Father Ondříček certainly belongs there; he even, formally speaking, died reconciled, duly provided with the Last Rites... so... as long as our Father who art in Heaven is only even a little righteous...

Only thoughts like this are a sin. He, Ivan, is a sinner. And if only it were just that. Some things it isn't possible either to redress or to conceal, at best to wipe over with a handkerchief and confide them

to one's confessor. And even before that the Lord Father will have already learnt about these. The Lord Father; Ivan's father; the omniscient.

From a certain time it had been as though the stony corridors of the former institute for the deaf-mutes had become somewhat colder.

In Father Ondříček he cannot now confide. A rational person knows that for what one is unable to do, one must not – or rather cannot – even be sorry! And anyway, Ivan had recently taken to turning his nose up at Father Ondříček's rather phlegmatic and businesslike theology.

“In Heaven there is more pleasure to be derived from just a single reformed sinner than from...”

Father Ondříček was a pure person! And that is the bottom line.

And Ivan is starting to be afraid that he won't manage to reshape himself.

Faith is mystery and mercy. Without a doubt. In this formulation an abyss is hidden, but will the Father forgive Ivan for not managing to plunge into it? Will he perhaps find favour in Ivan for at least descending uncertainly down the rope?

Abstinence? The promise of purity? Why not!

Ivan assumes to know what the Father is pursuing with these prohibitions; he should become a soldier serviceman of the Lord, not a slave of the body... which is something that Ivan really wouldn't want. And why should he. After all, he knows well that there is nothing desirable about that! He wants to be with Father. By him and with him. To serve? Fine. If it is only a question of method.

He soon grows gaunt, and from kneeling on the cold floor he gets inflammation of the kneecaps. It hurts him, he would like to put cheese curd on them. Cheese curd takes away fever, Aunt Emma had told him that, but immediately added that she was saying it only to him and he must not tell it to anyone because it is a secret. And because it is old-fashioned and unhygienic.

During this recollection of Aunt Emma and of her disconsolate and sweaty hands with swollen joints, Ivan starts to feel ashamed. It occurred to him, that now he is even emotionally blackmailing his Father a little.

He knows himself. He knows how coolly his head works. He hasn't made any progress.

«My father, whose son I am, is neither a sentimental old pedagogue, nor a slow-witted cadre, nor petrified school headmaster, from whom I had to willy-nilly win stamps of commendation. I wished to devote a life to service in His name. And now I am here. I am here.»

The cold, the chill is tormenting; it has no presence in this part of the mystery. Ivan's wintercoat is pitiful, shabby and short, inherited it from some litt'l'un. He had kept his promise that he would not eat too much, but in spite of this he grew. He sleeps in the communal bedroom and gulps down state subsidized food, but in his pockets he doesn't have a penny. Or rather he shouldn't have it. What the parish does not club together, he doesn't have – and the parish doesn't bend over backwards for him by any means. The position after Father Ondříček has remained vacant. The new one, who will perhaps be appointed there, doesn't know Ivan. Father Ondříček died suddenly; from him Ivan inherited some old towels and a crumpled tin box containing a shaving kit. The remainder of his things were taken by his family; Ivan hadn't even suspected that the priest had any. At eighteen he left the children's home. As a goodbye present Aunt Emma gave him a sewing kit.

“It's a nice practical present, but you won't know what it's for. You'll have to find a girl soon, Ivan my love...”

He smiled at her, he was now taller than her.

“And write to me, Ivan dear...”

There still remains plenty that he has to buy, only with what? His fellow students of theology are largely obliging sons from settled pious families; from them he can get nothing but a Moravian accent.

But that is now the last thing which should be considered as important.

For the Father is Love, and love is a terrible and brutal thing.