

Hana ANDRONIKOVA
A story and a novel excerpt

The Call of Bones

Once upon a time.

She loves him. And he loves her. Every night she falls asleep, coiled around his chest. Every morning he leaves, kisses her cheek, smiling. She stays in the house with the garden. Bright rooms and air, paintings of light, imprints of dreams on white walls. The house full of her, she talks to flowers, hums their names and shapes. In the evening he returns. They dine at the table of glass, then fall asleep, skin against skin. Years go by, trees grow in the garden, the hedge thicker each spring.

One day they buy a new bed. King-sized. So wide that they can barely find each other across it. Soon, in the middle of the bed, a spring is born. Just a little stream, thin as a blade of grass, flowing between them, each night, gaining strength, taking more and more, becoming wider and deeper. A brook. Wild water, the banks eroding, drifting apart. A broad river, running through the night to wed the ocean.

She has a dream, dream of him. Of them. He bends over her in the dark, looking. The dry pools of his eyes watching her sleep, drinking her rain, so thirsty, a wasteland within.

In the morning she wakes, weak and washed out. Remembering the dream, his frozen eyes. He awakes next to her, his eyes smiling. So different from the dream. It is him again, her husband. She loved those eyes. Long ago she fell into them, a firefly in a web of thread, rocking and laughing.

The dream keeps retuning, time and again. Locked in a chain of nightmares, she fears darkness. And those empty eyes. Slowly, she feels herself fading.

One day she arises, tired and drained. She takes a bath, spreads almond milk over her body, combs her hair. She opens the closet. Rows of hangers, colours and fabrics. A few of those she tosses into a bag, then her comb, her perfume. One pull of the zipper. She leaves the house, closes the door, locks up.

She will not look back.

She boards a train. The rhythm of sleepers like her heart, drumming. She listens, follows its voice. Departing, arriving, destinies of other people pass her by, crowds of ashen beings.

She wants colours.

She heads towards the shore. The air seasoned with seagulls, ebb and flow, all in waves, the reign of moon. Her palms full of wind, sails in white array. The rocking of a ship; she talks with the sea, her body an ocean, her tears drowning in salty waters.

She drops her perfume, a small bottle of scent vanishing in the wake. Her skin full of sun, smell of kelp. She is jealous of dolphins, their play. Weightless. All around, the flat line of horizon, skies blending into water. At night, the universe floating on the waves.

She reaches the shore, touches the land, shy steps, dizzy. She carries on. Finds an old knife, blunt and rusty. She holds it like a comb, brushing out her hair, spilling it on the ground. She leaves cities, synthetic lights, flickering will-o'-the-wisps, noise and rat race, treasures which turn into chains.

Passing through the land of rain, she opens her mouth, her skin cools. In the realm of thunder and storm, she feels decay, rebirth, soaking leaves in flashes of lightning. She breathes in the rain, earth under her feet, changing, becoming soft. Her footprints on the ground, the soil written into her soles.

Her last dress in shreds, the last pair of shoes she buries in leaves.

She talks to herself, marvels at her thoughts. She doesn't fear them. Not anymore. Her song returns, the tune of her grandmothers.

She dreams again. Dreams of colours, open sky and rocky heights, turtle eggs in the sand. She will not look back.

The air changes, shivers hot and dry, the horizon melts in the heat. She smiles, caught up in waves again, sun and shadow. Desert. Spilling in front of her like a lake. Sand in dunes, reflecting the light.

I'm like this desert, she thinks.

She's stopped speaking to herself, her thoughts void of shape. I am this desert. Bare, dried out, nothing but skin. She breathes, hot air burns her lungs. She feels water. Her blood lets her know. Everything is underground, invisible. Roots of small plants, running deep, fine threads criss-crossing the earth, holding all in place. Hundreds of feet below there is life. Streams, brooks, rivers.

She lies down, breathes in. Hot sand whispers. She dives in, digging, sinking her hands deeper and deeper, the sand moist with tears of earth. She doesn't feel her fingers, her nails peel off in flakes like an onion. Looking at her hands, she doesn't know them. Her knuckles hairy, covered in a thick coat. The digging becomes easier, her paws thrust into the wet sand. Then the first drops of water, welling up. Pool of water. She drinks, laps it with her tongue.

Who is she? Puma, jackal, wolf? She doesn't care. Doesn't want to know. She only knows that she has found it, she has it back again. Her glow. She feels it inside, burning as a torch, lighting her way.

Wild and unbound, she wanders the desert, making love to it. Everything underneath.

Her sight reaches the very bottom, the core, throughout the sand and stone, the layers of earth. She sees rivers and lakes underground, cold water, melting in the depths. The core is fire, undying flame. She reaches the source, the stream, hot and boiling, burning her to ashes.

Every morning she is born again.

She runs. The land of no one, she stops only at night to sleep. The sun sets, darkness covers the land. The moon is an orange, spelled by the black of night, changing colour, becoming a white flower, innocent and frail, pulsing, pulling her in.

Soothing darkness.

She senses mountains beyond the horizon. Can't see them yet, but she knows.

She crosses the prairie, heading north. Climbing the heights of silent snow, places where only spirits dwell.

The mountain. Its peak reaches eagle nests, steep and beautiful in its cool. Alone and free.

I am like this mountain.

She carries on, higher, heading to the sky, slowing down, slipping on the smooth surface of the rock, every step a struggle, the air frozen and thin. She stops to catch her breath, regain her strength, growling, her tongue hangs in the wind. Tripping and stumbling, sliding down, she tries again. The peak above, within reach, looking down on her. A sting of defeat. She is stuck, so close to the top, exhausted. She curls into a ball. The sky falls into the valley, darkness veils over the mountain.

She falls asleep.

In her dream she sees the days to come. Bending, she looks at her reflection in the lake. A stranger. She is losing teeth, one by one. No pain, they wiggle, then fall out. Her bones thinning inside, the marrow drying up, her back paws slimmer and longer. Her front legs shrink, her claws wane. She drops weight, sheds her skin, too large for her body.

She wakes. A bizarre dream. Even more bizarre is her real body. Her fur thin, her bones too, hollow, full of spaces. No front legs. Alarmed, she claps her jaws, her head filling with unknown sound. Toothless, yet sharp as a razor blade. Only her eyes are the same, searching her odd, ruined body. Am I dying? She looks around and the landscape has changed. She sees everything. The mountain, the plains in the distance, the same mountain, the same plains she had seen yesterday, but all is different now. Her vision, acute and keen, cuts through everything. She sees details, every tree miles away, each bush, its berries and leaves, birds in nests, speckled eggs about to burst. Light-headed, she leans forward, filled with awe. On the edge of the cliff, the mouth of an abyss. A piece of rock breaks off, she slides, loses her grip. Free fall. She holds her breath. The peak above her, the earth rising to meet her. She turns in the air and sees birds. So high in the clouds, in the lightness of wind, so close to the sky. Soaring.

She moves. A strange motion, just a few meters above the ground. Hanging. Stuck in the air. Then that motion again. A flap. Again. She inhales. A loud cry breaks out of the depths of her body.

An eagle, climbing the bones of air.

She looks back. Her eyes a telescope, scanning all details, postcards from places faraway, milestones of her journey. The beginning. Her house and her man. Herself. Weak and pallid. The place she once called home, in the distance that cannot reach her.

I am home now. For home is everywhere I go.

She can see the path ahead, shades of dawn. She looks at the world swimming in yellow light. Taking a deep breath, she sets off again. On the wings.

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The Sound of the Sundial, a twentieth-century family epic moves in time and place from Zlín to India, the United States, and Auschwitz. Beginning in present-day Colorado with an accidental meeting of two Czech emigrants, the story centers on the fatal love of Thomas Keppler and his Jewish wife Rachel, seen through the eyes of their little son, Daniel. Daniel spends his childhood in India surrounded by colorful extremes, myths, and fairy tales. In 1938 the family returns to Europe. With the occupation of Czechoslovakia and, subsequently, Rachel's deportation to the Terezin ghetto, Daniel's world of harmony and security vanishes forever.

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Chapter II: Another World

[excerpt]

By the early 1930s, the Bat'a company had branches on three continents. Expansion while the world was in crisis. Worldwide, companies were going bust one after another, unemployment and poverty loomed, and Bat'a was hiring new people by the dozen. They called themselves Bat'a's young men. They spread out across America, Asia and Africa, heading for exotic regions, primeval forests and jungles, in order to raise modern industrial cities out of nowhere.

He was sorting out the final details before his departure. Maps, books and guides. A visit to the hospital. Jarda Bartošík had him examined from head to toe and showered him with warnings: beware of the water, don't eat raw vegetables, take quinine every morning to guard against malaria. Have you seen a dentist? No? So get that done as well.

And then the immunisation certificates: typhus, typhoid, dysentery, cholera, smallpox. Copies of deeds for the construction sites and his papers of accreditation. Sunglasses.

Late in the afternoon, he was standing in a group of twenty-somethings handing out his final instructions.

– Check your passports, medical certificates and all your other papers. Don't forget your medicines. Any questions?

One of the young men hesitated. Then he put up his hand like in school.

– Yes. I – the thing is, I've got all my papers and certificates, but – I don't speak a word of English.

The others burst out laughing. Thomas didn't even blink.

– Then don't forget to take a dictionary. Anything else?

On the way home he couldn't dispel his fear. He wasn't afraid for her. He knew that she would cope without him, but he didn't know how he would cope himself. She had dinner waiting.

– When do you leave?
 – The day after tomorrow.
 – And when will I see you?
 – I'll send for you as soon as I can. I suppose in about six months. If there are no snags. Six months. Half a year. Now that it was out his heart sank. Six months. How innocent it sounded. So why was he feeling so miserable.

– I hope there won't be any snags.

She smiled.

– Obviously there are *bound* to be snags.

She nodded. The golden spangles on her earrings danced. She opened a box of matches. Fishing out a red-headed stick, she dashed it against the striker. She held the flame between her fingers. The blaze of her earrings entered his eyes, circled his bloodstream. One by one, she lit the candles on the table. He could feel the molten wax against his skin. How could he leave her? He stood up and walked round the table. Her face in gold, a pounding in his temples. Kneeling, he sank into the folds of her yellow-orange dress, pulling her towards him, locking his arms. No way out. Flesh and crimson moss of the carpet framed by her raven hair. A maze of colour carved in his memory. Sun and blood.

A brief farewell at the station and an endless line of sleepers taking him away, to remote and unknown corners.

He embarked. Losing touch with terra firma. The air full of salt, silver gulls and flying fish. The ship like a fish-scale amid the waves, veering from side to side, deckchairs sliding across the deck. Stewards with obliging smiles offering steaks, polite refusals, the loud laughter of a seductive Viennese girl. She knows a trick to confuse customs officials. She has bought eight pairs of shoes, but if you wear down the soles of each just a little bit, they can't prove a thing. Of course, they would return the duty at the frontier if you're only in transit, but all those forms to fill in – who would tangle with bureaucrats? She could already see herself sipping sherry in Bombay.

Then the sun came up revealing mountain peaks on the horizon. Mainland in sight. Green islands, the shore, port officials on the landing stage checking passports and visas. He disembarked. The god Vishnu took three steps and crossed the entire universe. He needed another thirty-six hours by train to reach his destination.

He wanted to buy something for Rachel. He headed for a stylish shop with huge window displays. Unique pieces of ivory, all manner of fabrics, amber statuettes, jewellery of beaten bronze, cigars and spices. He bought an inlaid writing box.

They stared at me aggressively and shouted something in anger when I refused to take a rickshaw powered by their own body. They were gaunt and looked sick. I only understood this bitterness when an Englishman, who had just boarded one of these two-wheeled vehicles, turned to me: You're new here, aren't you? They get upset when a sahib refuses to let them earn some small change.

In the afternoon I went to have a look at the central bazaar in Calcutta. A shocking experience for a well-raised European. At every step shopkeepers would insist on pressing their wares on me. Thrust in my face I had silk saris, men's shirts, shoes, panama hats, and veritable firework display of ostrich feathers, live birds and monkeys. Native men squatted atop mounds of coffee, coconuts, mangos, bananas, oranges. All reaching out to touch me. They caught me by the hand or tugged at the sleeves of my sweat-soaked shirt. Storekeepers, rickshaw-drivers, children, the most wretched of beggars seeking alms. Exotic beauties in saris. The scene lived a life of its own, assailing all my senses. I drowned in a palette of colours, in a mixture of heady perfumes and the stench of decay, in the stifling heat of inarticulate noise, arguing and shouting. I let myself to be swallowed up in the rhythm of their lives. Rachel, this city has a soul.

Last evening I was walking along the shore where one of the many arms of the Ganges enters the sea. I spotted a lone diver in a little dug-out canoe. A net and two oars, that was all he had. He tucked the net under his armpit and disappeared under the waves. It was over three minutes before he re-surfaced. The net was full of shells.

He couldn't waste time. He went about finding how other companies' builders coped with the Indian climate, solved the ventilation problem and braved monsoons and earthquakes. He fitted out workshops for mechanics and carpenters. Stocking the company shops had to proceed at lightening speed. In Bengal and neighbouring Assam alone there were a hundred shops to set up. In the mornings, he would wake to the heavy fog of Calcutta. That's probably why the English settled here, he mused; it must have reminded them of London. Daytime temperatures gradually rose to 40°C in the shade. He would knock out reports to Zlín until well into the night. Worn to a shadow, bathing in his own sweat, he tried to gather fragments of thought, interrupted by memories of home. He was annoyed by the heaps of details he had to write out. Wooden shelves cost five rupees each, the deposit for an electricity metre comes to about twenty-five rupees...

He felt trapped. This was a different world. Life in the streets of Calcutta pulsed every inch of the way. He met people of every colour. From white Englishmen to the blackest of black men, members of every religion and caste, from Tibetan lamas in their orange robes to untouchables. He reached the River Hoogli. The city had once settled down like some gigantic beast on its left bank and ever since had lapped up its turbid waters, feeding countless houses, streets, hovels and rubbish dumps.

The stifling air was riven by strange calls. Kalighat! Kalighat! Voices promising something, something fascinating, something not to be missed. Kalighat! Voices of bus-drivers. They were calling on the goddess Kali. Kalighat! He wavered about, hands in pockets, then absently boarded one of the buses. They drove down the avenue of shop-fronts on Chauringi, the main thoroughfare, where he had taken up residence a fortnight earlier. Then the right side of the street disappeared and the Maidan opened out before him. A vast plain in the middle of a city. The brown-skinned driver in a white shirt keeps chanting his formula: Kalighat! Kalighat! Like a granite mountain, the white statue of Queen Victoria looms and the man at the wheel wheezes Kalighat! Kalighat! The road drowning in detached houses and engine noise. The brakes of the bus screeched. Kalighat! A voice announcing the destination.

He staggered out of the bus. Nothing but ordinary houses of European appearance, boring and severe. Run-of-the-mill vegetable gardens and a battered bus plastered with adverts. The other passengers looked neither confused nor cheated. They headed towards the little street running up between two houses. He followed. The European houses disappeared, and suddenly, he found himself walking through a mysterious garden. The sensual smell of flowers in a cloud of steam and buzzing insects. Sticky mud began to cling to his soles. A strange mud. This squelching, reeking sludge was blood. Hot, fresh, running. The air filled with blood. Stunned, he trips over stray dogs; starved and greedy, licking at the cooling blood. Above the scene a pulsation, a rumbling and the wailing of flutes. The Brahmin is ready. The sound of drums fills the yard, reaches a climax, eyes of the pilgrims have a bloodthirsty glare. The priest approaches the sacrifice with a wide sword. A forked wooden chopping block clamps the neck and the instrument of death cleaves the air with a swish. The mesmerised crowd in waves of excitement. Streams of blood from severed arteries, the lamb's head in a pool of red, attendants carrying off the corpse. All for her. For Kali. The earth soaked with the lives of sacrificial lambs. Crushing hordes of pilgrims buying wreathes of marigolds offering them to the powerful goddess. Reflections of the midday sun in pools of blood. A cactus tree in the yard, hung about with amulets of women who have come to plead for a son.

He did not know how he ended up inside the temple with its pale blue mosaic on its low tower. The temple of the goddess Kali. Kali was safe within the inner sanctum, but even there the stench must have reached her. It was everywhere. Intoxicating and unnerving, taste of blood. Spirals of smoke on the riverbank. Roaming among the crowds there were sacred bulls, well-fed zebus and sadhus – holy men whose raiment is dust and whose only property is a begging bowl. Contours of dead bodies on funeral pyres and the monotonous murmur of the Brahmins. A burning ghat. Steps descend to the river, where the living bathe.

And then the image that opened up before him.

A stack of wood about two feet high and three feet long and on it flowers and a girl dressed in white. Her legs deliberately broken and forced back towards her head. Such handling saves money of the bereaved. Wood has to be paid for. The pyre blazes up, a weary calm around it, no one weeps. Clothes disappear and flesh slowly chars, the face and ribcage take on strange dimensions, the body twisting in a dramatic dance. All the moisture is driven off, the body begins to carbonise. The pyre and bodily remains disintegrate, to the ashes the dead girl's father consigns a sacrificial coin encased in the dung of a sacred cow. The fire has died down, the pile of residue has slipped into the water. The river hissed with pain and the pilgrims carried on washing, passing their sins into the muddy waters.

Unsteadily, he made his way back past the congealing lamb's blood and the dogs with their flicking, saucer-shaped tongues. And suddenly, as if a curtain, or the flap of a circus tent, had dropped behind him, he was standing in the busy street. The show was over. Show? No, what he had witnessed was no show. The blood was real; the sacrifices, the burning corpses, everything was real. Even the goddess Kali. She had been there. He could sense her, he knew she was there. He knew that the Hindus' belief in Kali was genuine. In contrast with the modern houses, the Kalighat and its riot of blood seemed like gestures of a madman. Absurd, almost farcical.

He took the bus back into town, but he didn't feel like bed. He wandered about the Maidan, that vast area of dry, rustling grass in the middle of the city. He let his faltering legs carry him towards the noise of the harbour, towards the light coming from lamps and fires. Kidderpore. In among the fires were alleyways of scruffy shacks, canals and bridges. A native market place in the middle of the night, the turmoil, crashing and banging, confusion. Betel-sellers endlessly screaming 'Paan, paan', and women selling cheroots. The omnipresent smell of roast meat. His head spun.

Finally the contract was signed and the Bat'a company had become the owner of a defunct mineral oil refinery in Konnagar. Five years before the refinery had still been in production, but the company floundered into debt and never recovered.

He called a meeting. They were bending over a plan of the site and, pencils in hands, dividing up the jobs to be done.

– Josef, you take care of building No. 2. That'll be the warehouse. Move the entrance to the corner, but keep an eye on the statics, we don't want it coming down on your head. Knock another entrance through in the wall directly opposite.

– And the floor? Will it take our shelving?

– You'll have to concrete it over. Vehicles will be using the main corridor, so don't raise it too much there. Line the inside walls with proper bricks at an angle. Milan, you take No.10 and turn it into offices. Telegraphist, cashier and production on the ground floor. Keep the telegraphist close to the entrance, put an 'Information' sign there, and Videlka next door. Make sure he's got a window for paying out wages. Fit out the first floor for the reps – Jelínek will tell you what he needs.

Ruda Martinec could hardly wait his turn. He was nervously biting his nails and fanning himself with his note-pad. As soon as his boss looked at him, he blurted out his question.

– What about rubber production?

Thomas jabbed the tip of his pencil into the laid-out drawings.

– Building thirteen. Big enough for six rings. And blending in twelve. But don't go wild. You'll also need to fit the raw materials store in there.

He handed Martinec a sketch for the installation of the curing pans.

– Everything clear?

They spread out across the site.

He didn't have time to eat. He would down gallons of water and lukewarm tea and grab a few boiled vegetables in the evening. After a few weeks of eating vegetarian he went to a classy restaurant and ordered some forbidden fruit. A great chunk of meat. A local delicacy. He appreciated it fully only the next morning. He squatted in the lavatory, bent in half, a bucket in front of him. Dinner at a price. Damn, he thought, as he gazed into the bucket. Looks like bits of brain. With a dancing gait, he shambled about the room, but nothing was in its place. The furniture kept twisting, changing colour and shapes, the chairs shuffling their feet. The clock was ticking three times faster than normal, striking with a triple echo that sounded like a dog barking. The severe fever drove him right back to bed. The world around him was a merry-go-round.

She wrote that she was pregnant.

[...]

Chapter VII: Savitri

[excerpt]

In December 1938 Bat'a launched a new kind of waterproof shoe on the Indian market. Shoes in bowls of water in all shop windows. "In wet and dry". An immediate hit, fifteen annas a pair.

In the middle of January, Amon died. Father said he'd reached that age. I cried a lot. He'd been in the family since before I was born. I missed him.

In February 1939 Aunt Regina wrote a letter that changed our life:

Erik, Lily, and little Irma have emigrated. They're in England at the moment. Lily has some relatives there, but I don't know where they'll end up. Mother fell ill soon after; it's become clear she'd actually been ill for some time. There's no hope. The doctors say she has a month left, maybe two. I've taken time off because it would be hard for Father to look after her. They talk about you all the time. Life's playing games with us. Just as Father seemed to have pulled round after his stroke last year, everything has begun to slide back again. You'd hardly recognize them.

- Rachel, try to understand. We can't go back.
- My mother is dying.
- I know. I know it's hard, but we can't go back now.
- I have to go back. I owe it to her.
- Rachel –
- I haven't seen her since you and I have been together.
- His throat tightened.
- There's going to be a war. It's – suicide.
- I have to go home!

He couldn't swallow, his voice failing him He was sticking his leg out to stop a moving train.

- Rachel –
- If you won't come with me, I'm going alone.
- You can't do that.
- I will!

She shot out of her chair and slammed the door behind her.

Stifled by the muggy heat, he remained sitting in the garden till dusk. The evening chant of the parched earth. Leaves of banyan trees, like naked little hearts with sharp tips, ready to defend their own vulnerability. Cicadas bringing in darkness and clamour. Everything changed.

I made my farewells. India. Kavita. Her embraces, songs, and incantations. The people with countless stories and gods. A small pack on my back, I became a pilgrim against the flow of time.

I'd never flown before. It seemed incredible that the heap of metal would ever lift itself off the ground. We rose into the sun, the ground below us like a gigantic map, without frontiers or customs, without watchtowers. I had turned into a giant striding with seven-league boots over deserts and mountains. Rivers, the thin threads like tiny veins on the curve of a body.

We landed in Vienna and switched to the train. On the evening of Sunday, March 12, I arrived in the town of my birth. A town I didn't know. Not even my parents recognized it. In six years it had grown by thousands of inhabitants and hundreds of houses and buildings. The skyscraper, the city's landmark, Tomáš Bat'a Memorial in glass and concrete, schools and film studios. Uniformity of style; parks and gardens.

Three days later, snow was floating down on the roofs of red brick houses. Armoured cars, personnel carriers and motorcycles streamed across the flimsy frontier of the Protectorate. The Legionnaires in front of Prague Castle were replaced by Death's Heads in black. Czechoslovakia became a ghost.

Mother left for Prague to visit Grandma. Then she had phoned to say that we should come. My grandparents wanted to meet me.

The handle of the door to the Vinohrady apartment was so high up I could barely reach it. An affable gentleman walking with a stick appeared. A short, but full, greying beard and pince-nez on his nose. He gazed at my father for a long time. His eyes of quicksilver. They had never seen each other before. Now they stood face to face, staring at each other. A wordless dialogue, lacking sound or form. Seconds and minutes passing by in awkward silence, I waited for someone finally to speak. I slipped my hand into my father's. He looked at me and winked.

—Say hello to Grandpa, Daniel. Or has the cat got your tongue?

The old man laughed. Come in, you strangers, let's get to know each other. He shook my hand and put on an official expression. I liked him. I had always wanted a grandfather like that.

With a strange tightness in my throat, I crossed the threshold. High ceilings, stucco, and antique furniture. The place engulfed in Persian carpets, clocks ticking in every corner.

Grandma. Looking like a little girl, tiny and feeble, a sick child with the face of an old woman. The massive bed framed her fragility. Eyes, in a web of wrinkles, full of pain, skin cracked like earth in the dry season. I gave her my hand. She grabbed it and held me. Trying to say something, she began to cry. But that slight hand, those bony fingers, with swollen knuckles, hid a surprising strength. My hand in a vice. It was unpleasant; I felt ill at ease and wanted to get out. I looked round the room breathing in a smell that made my stomach heave. A whiff of age and approaching death. Mother freed me from the grasp and sent me to Grandpa. As I entered the dining room, Margit was just serving supper. My father and Grandpa were sitting at a huge oval table that could easily have sat twelve, discussing something. I was taken by the antique sideboard. If only these bits of furniture could speak, Grandpa said, tapping the tabletop. Walnut. Two hundred years ago, a French count had it made as a wedding present for his fiancée. But, as the cabinetmaker was putting in the finishing touches, life took up the cards and reshuffled them. The count's fiancée didn't live to see her wedding. And so the fate of this set of furniture changed course.

Father left the next day, but I stayed for two weeks. An amazing fourteen days. With Grandpa. I would sidle up the gloomy staircase and finger the elaborate banisters, the wooden handrail. The patina of dozens of years and hundreds of touches. Running my hand against the grain, I imagined all those people who had touched it. Matriarchs squeezed into corsets and crinolines, every step rustling, gentlemen in top-hats, and young, neatly pressed young ladies in

dainty gloves.

I couldn't have asked for a better guide to the city of the past than the old professor of history. The subjection and gloss of majesty, a city glorified and spurned, revealing its mystery yet always mysterious.

The Jewish cemetery and the Old-New synagogue. An old man, a yarmulke on his bald head, in the gloom of Gothic walls, his lips singing colours of Hebrew words, swaying to their rhythm, hunched, a bundle of body beneath a prayer shawl, twining his prayer straps over a book of psalms. For the first time I heard Hebrew, prayers, and I saw the Torah, listened to the stories of Abraham and Sarah. I fell asleep to images of Moses: the sea parting before him and the Jews leaving Egypt. I added a stone to the grave of Rabbi Löw.

– Why do we put stones on the grave, not flowers?

– Because we come from hard lands, from deserts and highlands where flowers are difficult to find. A stone says the same as a flower. That you have stood over the graves of the dead and thought of them.

And then there was a celebration. Passover, the Jewish spring holiday. The Exodus. In Hebrew *pasah* means to pass by, leave out. Yahweh would go from house to house, and wherever he did not see the mark of blood, he killed the firstborn son. He passed over the homes of the Israelites.

Grandpa told me how my mother used to be nervous before Seder, because, as the youngest, she had to recite Mah Nishtanah. She would fidget during the reading of the Haggadah, never managed to sit through to the end.

His eyes turned from me, brightening. The last twenty years, he said, had been the first years of this Republic. Free and beautiful. His face changed .

– Now it's over.

He blew across his palm, as if blowing a kiss.

– Just like that, and it's gone.

He gave me a pocket watch. The first watch I ever had. A Remontoir patent, big Roman numerals, a tiny winder and a second hand. I opened the back. Sparkling and perfect. Delicate wheels and miniscule teeth spinning the web of time. Fifteen jewels and grandpa's monogram in gold.

I left Prague feeling I had discovered yet another god. Years later I understood that it was something more. Roots. Part of my own roots. And someone who had parted the surface and showed me how deep they went.

I never saw him again.

[...]

*Translated from the Czech by David Short
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