

American Dream

Vojtěch Žák



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Translation: Šárka Procházková

Graphic cover design: Vojtěch Žák

Typographic layout: Vojtěch Žák

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Session D.

Establishing the rules

David Lacko was sitting in one of the uncomfortable white plastic chairs decorating Roland Deyl's waiting room, and since he was annoyed, he kept kicking the wall.

His mother pressed a hand to his knee, hissing an annoyed "Stop it" in his ear.

David huffed angrily but obeyed. "Did we have to come so early?" he snapped. "We still have ten minutes before it's even supposed to start."

"We wouldn't have to be here so early if you'd learn to be on time."

Frowning, he rested his face on his hand and regarded his surroundings with a look of deep annoyance. The walls of the room were painted bright green, and covered with pictures, most of which were adorned with the sentence:

What do you pretend not to know?

I pretend not knowing whose fault this is, David thought. But he wasn't a snitch, and that wasn't going to change. And after all, he didn't come out of this mess that bad off.

Though what was ahead of him was bound to be a real pain in the arse.

The door to the waiting room opened, and a middle-aged man with a beard entered from the other room. He was frowning and, without uttering a word, stalked away in long angry strides, the entrance door slamming behind him.

David stared at the door of the... what was he supposed to call it, an office? He wasn't waiting for a medical check-up. The sign on the door read:

Roland Deyl
personal coach

"He probably isn't very good if he's pissing people off like that," David smirked, but he felt a lump growing in his throat.

"Watch your tongue, you should be glad it didn't end up being worse than this!" his mother snapped back.

"Sure," David sighed, "I was just thinking that borstal could be more fun."

"One more word and I'm gonna send you there first thing tomorrow."

David turned to her sharply and stared at her in a silent challenge, his hazel eyes boring into hers, the same colour but a different shape. *Go on. Do it, I dare you.*

They stared at each other for a long moment, until his mother gave up and looked away. David returned to idly kicking the wall, his mood even sourer than before.

Finally, the office door opened a second time.

The man who stepped out looked somewhat shabby. Light brown hair falling to his shoulders, a well-trimmed beard, and narrow glasses. His clothes were clean and pressed but obviously well worn, a button-up with a blazer thrown over it accompanied by, of all things, a pair of green trousers. The brown oxfords he was wearing were practically falling apart and in dire need of a replacement.

He smiled brightly, holding the file in his hands in a way that reminded David strangely of hospital nurses. "You're Mr Lacko?" he asked, tone chipper, then glanced at David's mother in surprise. "And Mrs Lacko, I suppose." He shook her hand. "My name is Roland Deyl. I'm a personal coach." Then he turned to David, who accepted the offered hand unwillingly. He tried to press Deyl's hand as hard as possible but the man's palm was too big to get a good grip.

Deyl stepped back, studying his papers. "I was supposed to meet Mr Lacko alone today, and I must humbly admit I wasn't expecting you here, Mrs Lacko. Can I do something for you?"

"Well... I... I wanted to know what exactly you're gonna do with my son. How do you plan to oversee him and ensure that he's going to start behaving better?"

"I don't intend to oversee him," Deyl smiled, and both David and his mother blinked at him in surprise.

"I beg your pardon?" David's mother said, incredulous.

"This is not a prison, Mrs Lacko. We could put Mr Lacko under strict supervision, of course. Put him behind bars and have him report to us every day, we could create almost military-like rules for him... but what a surprise, that would be rather counterproductive to what our goal is." He went

silent for a moment, watching both of them carefully. "The jury decided we are to have ten meetings in total and that, for the period of one year, Mr Lacko is to be under 'supervision'," he made air quotes with his fingers. "Now, that's truly a lot. So I think we can sacrifice our first session for an explanation of what's ahead of us. If Mr Lacko agrees to it," he turned to David.

"Agrees to what?" David was very confused.

"To your mother participating in our first session. We won't go into any personal stories of course. We'll simply talk about how we are going to work together so that we are able to reach the goals you are going to set for yourself."

"What?" David pulled a face. It sounded suspicious. He thought the jury was sending him to some sort of probation officer who would be digging into his private life and who'd want weekly, or even daily reports so that he wouldn't have the chance to do anything dumb. His mother being present for it was the last thing he wanted.

"Of course he's gonna agree with me being there," his mother snapped.

Roland Deyl smiled at her, a sad expression on his face. "With all due respect Mrs Lacko, this is not for either of us to decide. It depends solely on Mr Lacko because he's the one who is my client."

"What are you talking about?"

Deyl sighed a little before replying. "Well, technically my client is the state. They're paying me to prevent young offenders from relapsing as part of an experimental treatment as well as helping them pay off their so-called debt to society. But as far as I'm concerned, that's only on paper. I don't care as much for what the state wants from me as for

what Mr Lacko and my other clients truly need. Therefore I intend to protect his privacy from everybody, including his family. This time belongs to him, and he has already lost five minutes of it. It is on him to decide how he wants to hold the session and if he is going to allow you to learn more about it.” Deyl turned to David then. “So, Mr Lacko, tell me. Do you agree with your mother being present during the first session?”

“Okay,” David agreed in the end. He was starting to get intrigued by it all.

“Excellent,” Deyl clapped his hands in satisfaction and invited both of them to his office.

To David, the room looked like a place where an uptight organized manager would be right at home. It was long and narrow, with the walls painted a neutral beige, probably to instill some sense of comfort, a few pictures hung here and there. There was a comfortable-looking armchair and a faux leather couch. It looked almost cosy, with everything so neat and tidy, just like Deyl’s mind and soul probably were. David couldn’t help sneering. So many things around, but so tightly organized. The walls were also lined with shelves that were full of knick knacks; papers, pens, dice, and even some playing cards. And of course, proudly overlooking it all from the wall was another taunting sign:

What price are you paying for your actions?

“Most of my clients from the business sphere are pretty triggered by this sentence,” Deyl smiled when he noticed

what David was looking at. “*Two thousand crowns per hour*, they complain. But that’s only during the first few sessions, then they get over it.”

“How come?” David asked.

“Because they either find out that what I am doing is working, or stop coming. Can I offer you something? Coffee, tea, water?”

In the end, three cups of coffee appeared on the table. One with milk for David’s mother and two plain black ones for the men. David immediately added an obscene amount of sugar to his cup. Deyl examined his wristwatch which showed that it was now twenty-five minutes after five. He tapped it thoughtfully.

“Allow me to tell you something about myself first. My name is Roland Deyl, I’m thirty-two, single, no kids. I started coaching professionally five years ago but I was doing it as an amateur for many years before that. Why did I become a professional? Because I have found out that it’s the most effective way for me to help people.

My policy is the following: I am here to support my clients with anything in their life that doesn’t work the way they’d like it to. I am not here to solve their problems for them. I’m merely offering help.

What should also be mentioned: I don’t care about Mr Lacko’s past. I’m not here to judge him. I’m just here to find out what’s not working in his life and what can be done in order to make it work.”

“I still don’t get it,” David’s mother declared. “What are you gonna do with him?”

Mr Deyl shrugged. “I don’t know yet,” he said, turning to David. “We will begin by talking about your life. You can tell

me about the things you're happy with and the ones you're not. What you'd like to achieve. What obstacles are in your way. We will come up with a plan on how to overcome them. We'll probably employ a system consisting of me giving you an assignment to complete after every session. It will be up to you whether you fulfill it or not. After all, you will be doing it for your own benefit, not mine. But, there are a few things we need to agree on first."

"Like what?" David asked.

"I would like for us to agree on some basic rules. But now that I'm thinking about it, I believe it would be best done in privacy," he turned to David's mom.

"You can't be serious," she retorted, her expression once again incredulous.

Mr Deyl shrugged. "The truth is, Mrs Lacko, that I would like to speak with you in private as well. But I need to speak with your son first."

"You wanna hear her talk shit about me, huh?" David sneered at him. He felt as though he had just bitten into a lemon, his expression turning sour. "You don't have to, I can tell you what she thinks about me. That I am irritated, rude and degenerate. That I'm throwing my talent away and I keep bad company and if things go on like this, I will end up in prison soon," he named all of his mother's usual complaints, spitting them out like poison.

"And do you agree with her?" Deyl looked at him, paying no attention to his mom's loud protests.

"What does it matter what I think," David leaned back in his chair, folding his arms on his chest. He didn't understand what the man's deal was. His feet were itching to start kicking something again.

“As you wish. I don’t want to talk with your mother about you, Mr Lacko. I want to speak with her about the whole process of our meetings, and also a bit about herself. Therefore it is important for me to speak with her in private. It’s for the same reason that I want to speak with you in private as well. The privacy of my clients is one of the most important things in these sessions.”

“Whatever. If you say so,” David huffed, unconvinced.

“Mrs Lacko, would you mind waiting for me in the waiting room? It won’t take long.”

Mrs Lacko did, in fact, mind but she settled on shooting them both an angry look and slamming the door to the waiting with more force than necessary.

“Mr Lacko, I need to agree with you on when and how our meetings are going to take place. I also need to inform you that I am obliged to deliver regular reports on how our meetings are progressing. I won’t put anything compromising in those, but I won’t lie either.”

This made David uneasy. “What sort of reports?”

“First I note whether you had come to a session or not. Then I report on what’s currently happening in your private life, what is your mental state, if and how you are contributing to society. As a part of your sentence you are also compelled to two hundred hours of community service, but what type of service that’s going to be is up to the two of us to agree upon. Although the ones upstairs will have to approve it of course.”

“The ones upstairs?” The description made David think of shadowy figures in black coats, sitting in a circle and deciding his fate with wicked grins on their faces. “Who’s that supposed to be?”

“Officers from the Ombudsman’s office.” Deyl paused shortly and looked at David in what he probably intended to be a reassuring manner before continuing: “Nothing you tell me is going to reach the ears of your mother. However, I might need to meet and work with her as well, in a similar way that I will with you.”

“Why would you need to work with my mum?”

“She has a great influence on your life. Just like your teachers, classmates, friends... but those would be hard for me to reach. I can reach your mother, though.”

The taste of poison from before came back, and David couldn’t help the outburst that overtook him: “She is the one who needs therapy, not me. If you had any idea about the things she does - ”

Mr Deyl raised his palm in a calming gesture. “A, this is not therapy but coaching. B, just as her opinion of you is not relevant to me, neither is your opinion of her. At least for now that is. We might get to it at some point, but not yet. Now, I need to talk to you about the time of our meetings. If I’m not mistaken, you are studying at the Captain Jaroš Gymnasium, second year. What does your schedule look like? Do you attend any after-school clubs, do you have a part-time job...?”

“Nah,” David grumbled, irritated by the interruption. Just another adult asshole who wasn’t listening to him. Adults never listened. No one ever listened to David.

“So when would you like to have our meetings?”

“Never. I don’t need a shrink.”

Mr Deyl shrugged, his expression infuriatingly calm. “I’m not a shrink. And I would be happy if you’d suggest a time.”

“All right,” David sighed in defeat. Might as well get this over with so that he could finally get out of there. “How about Wednesday at four?”

“Excellent. So we are going to meet in two days at four o’clock. Agreed?” He raised a hand for a handshake.

David stared at it in disbelief for a moment. He couldn’t tell if the man was making fun of him or not. The moment stretched on uncomfortably as Deyl looked at him expectantly and David just continued staring. Finally, David shrugged and shook the offered hand, sneering. “Sure. ‘greed.”

Mr Deyl accompanied him back to the waiting room and invited his mother into the office. The door clicked shut and David found himself alone. “This sucks,” he grunted under his nose. He really wanted to punch something but since the room lacked any suitable targets he kicked the wall. And again. And again. Fucking Koudela. Fucking Maroš, and Patrik, and Zdeněk, and Nikola! Fucking Kristýna! None of them got into trouble.

But life is not fair, so stop whining and get over it, a voice in his head retorted.

The door to the waiting room had suddenly opened then, and in came a petite woman with blonde hair. She was chubby, not quite fat but not far away from it either. With a flowy yellow dress and a pink purse, the only thing disturbing her picturesque Barbie visage was the black laptop bag swung over her shoulders.

She looked at him with curiosity for a split second before turning her head away. David shuffled his feet awkwardly and grumbled a quiet “Evening” in her direction, berating himself for how uncertain it sounded. Why was he so damn nervous?

She sat down and looked at him. "Good evening," she said finally.

"Evening," he repeated, this time louder.

"Are you waiting for Mr Deyl?"

"No. I'm waiting for my mother. What brings you here?"

She shrugged. "He is my coach."

"Ah. Is he any good?" David asked, not really interested in conversation, but his curiosity got the better of him.

She pondered for a while: "Yes, quite good," she said with a smile, and with that, the conversation ended.

A few moments later the door to the office finally opened and his mother came out. She shook hands with Mr Deyl at the threshold. "Thank you, doctor."

"I am not a doctor," he said. "I will be looking forward to it." Then he turned to David and offered his hand to him again. "It was a pleasure," he said. "Lucie," he turned to the newcomer, "give me a moment please, I'll be right with you."

"All right," she said, busily tapping away on the keyboard of the laptop she brought with her.

"Farewell," Ronald Deyl said to them and then disappeared into his office once more.

"What is he looking forward to?" David snapped at his mother.

"That's not important," she dismissed him, her tone suddenly relaxed and added: "You will see."

Her sour mood from before seemed to be gone.

Reality

David lit a cigarette.

The cold autumn wind blew his unzipped jacket open, so he huddled closer to the recess in the wall and passed the cigarette to the boy on his left. Koudela grinned at him, saying: "Why so tense, bruv? How was it?"

"All right," David grunted. "Looks like it's gonna be a piece of cake. Just gotta show up once per week and that's it."

"And that's it? Man, are you fucking kidding me? That's what you've been so stressed about? You're such a wuss."

Koudela was an arrogant football player with curly hair and an annoying habit of stretching his words out. He was regularly handing out insults without batting an eye. He was a fop, and had a reputation to maintain.

"You'd be stressed too, you wanker. They could have sent me to borstal. Now all I have to do is a couple hours of community service."

"Yeah? What does that mean?"

"Don't know. Probably picking up garbage or something. Or helping the elderly or something."

"Yoo, you'll be like a squatter, picking through trash" Maroš giggled, leaning on the wall next to them. Maroš had a head full of dreadlocks somewhat tamed by a headband, and he was constantly out of it because he was overdoing it with weed. Even now he was rolling a joint with practiced ease,

despite the fact that it was barely quarter to eight in the morning.

“Cut that stupid grin, you’re gonna come and help me.”

“Why should I?”

“Because you’re the ones who got me into it.”

“You got yourself into it.”

David tried to come at him. “You fucker!” he spat out angrily, but Koudela had intervened and stood between the two, not letting David get past him.

“Quit pretending you’re some big shot, pussy-boy, and clean up your own mess.”

“The fuck you mean, my own mess?” David pointed an accusatory finger at him, but his voice wavered a little. Koudela was a jock and he packed a strong punch when he wanted to. “It was you who got me into it.”

“You were trying to be cool,” Maroš grinned, unbothered by David’s words, and continued rolling his joint like nothing happened.

David was left speechless. You provoked me, was at the tip of his tongue but it felt lame, so he only shoved his hands in his pockets and hunched over. He desperately wanted another cigarette but had just run out. Koudela still had the one he passed him earlier.

Koudela noticed his wistful gaze. “Want some? Fuck you,” he said and stepped on the unfinished smoke. Then he turned to Maroš and started talking to him, completely ignoring David’s existence. Maroš lit his finished joint and the sickeningly sweet aroma of marijuana filled the air in the little alcove they were all standing in. The aroma of fun and relaxation. The aroma of alcohol and sex. They always smoked at Koudela’s home and then they would screw Lucie, or

Kristýna, or both at once. David was always either too wasted to join in, or told to fuck off and stop getting in the way.

That's what was happening now too. He was just getting in the way and being overlooked. No matter what, the joint wasn't passed his way. He really wanted to have a puff and loosen up a bit, even though he was afraid to be stoned during a lesson. Maroš never knew what the teacher was asking him about. Once, when they were talking about the Thirty Years' War in history class, Mazlová asked him why the bells toll twelve times at 11 o'clock in Brno. And Maroš, stoned out of his mind, stood up from his chair with eyes swollen red, and mumbled: "Was it lunch already? Have I been there? Or why are they tolling twelve?" David didn't want to be like him.

Since he didn't have anything better to say, David asked: "Shouldn't we go?" and right as the words left his lips he immediately felt like a wuss.

Koudela laughed in his face: "What are you so worried about? Scared of being sent to borstal?"

And so David stayed where he was. He stood there, hands in his pockets, even though he felt like an idiot. Stood there because he didn't know better. And the joint continued its journey between Koudela and Maroš and the air was full of the pleasant, heady smell, of weed and the clock struck eight, and their math lesson was just about to start.

"Koudela, Maroš, Lacko, well-well, the usual suspects," Kolářová exclaimed when they arrived at the classroom with a ten-minute delay. She looked like a proper Pratchettian dwarf. As Patrick - the dude who sat at the same desk as David - said some time ago: "Never trust anything that has both a pussy and a moustache."

“Later to begin, sooner to end, right?” David quoted one of the teacher’s favourite phrases.

He shouldn’t have done that. “Lacko, since you’re so smart, come here and show us how to calculate trigonometric functions.”

David had no clue, which didn’t prevent Kolářová from making a complete fool out of him in front of the whole class. As he was sitting down, he was red with fury. “Fucking bitch,” he whispered to Patrick, who nodded with sympathy: “Damn, she dished you out real good.”

But she was the last one. English, Czech, Chemistry and Geography passed and none of the teachers as much as looked at him. They just pretended he wasn’t there, no matter what he was doing. In Labs, he was jumping behind Strossmaier to attract her attention but got no reaction out of her. In the end he gave up and pulled out a book. There used to be a time when he would hide it under the desk. Now he just openly put it on the table without a care. David didn’t care what the teacher was talking about, it was all a load of nonsense anyway. He was just wasting his time in school, it was obvious. He’d rather spend it at home, playing video games or reading, or going for a walk and getting drunk with the rest of the gang.

Gang, yeah right, he thought bitterly. *As if there ever was one. As if I was ever part of it.*

“What are you doing after school?” he whispered to Kristýna during Music class. She was one of the hottest girls in the class, a bit shorter than David, with dark hair and a sweet smile. Not to mention a look in her eye that could turn a priest into a sinner by batting her eyelashes just once. It was hard not to eye her hungrily, especially

with the top she was wearing that day which showed off a lot more cleavage than usual. It was a recent development - she definitely wasn't this hot two years ago. Sitting so close to her, David felt like a little kid in a candy shop.

It took her a while to answer, she was way too immersed in singing "I am cursing you" which Kopecká - their little chubby music teacher, just one step away from retirement and two before a grave - screened the lyrics to on the wall, like they were in a karaoke bar, with love and pure enthusiasm bursting out of her elderly features.

"I have folklore dancing," Kristyna answered.

"Again?" David was both annoyed and surprised by her answer.

"I have it three times a week."

"So ditch it today and come to Lužánky with me," David pressed.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because it's important. We are getting ready for a competition."

"What competition?"

"Ječmínek. District championship."

"These things have championships?"

"Of course."

"What are you cooing about there, you lovebirds?" Kopecká snapped at them.

David pulled back from Kristýna.

"Do you know where else there was cooing?" Kopecká kept pushing.

David shrugged.

"So, do you know?"

"We don't," answered Kristýna, the picture of a dutiful schoolgirl which she in reality couldn't have been further away from.

"In A Night at Karlstein they were cooing too," Kopecká exclaimed, and a new song - The ones in love make mistakes - appeared on the wall.

At half past three David left the school with his mood no better than at the start. He didn't want to go home at all but he didn't know what else to do. Standing in the little courtyard in front of the building, the sun shining in his eyes, he watched as dozens of students went out the door. He felt incredibly awkward and displaced, but stayed, hoping for a saviour.

"Where are you going, Patrick?" he asked as his classmate was passing by.

"Hockey practice," Patrick answered.

"Where are you going, Zdeněk?" David asked another one.

"Scouts meeting," Zdeněk answered.

"Where are you going, Koudela?" David tried even his secret arch-nemesis, out of sheer desperation.

"To have fun," Koudela answered, watching Petra's tight ass hungrily as she passed by them.

"Fuck," David whispered.

"That as well," Koudela agreed.

For a while after that, David just roamed aimlessly around the city. He briefly went to the library to check out the comic books there but nothing caught his interest and his mood was still bad. "Maybe I could play something with Tereza," he wondered. With his mind set on the idea of some company he headed home, even though his original idea was to stay at the library until closing hours.

When he stepped out into the cold air it was already getting dark. The wind was blowing sharply, biting his face and making him zip up his jacket tighter to try and ward off the chill. He walked in the dim lighting of the street lamps down the street, across the square and past the theatre. As he was getting closer to his destination he also grew more cautious, looking around every few moments. People call the district he and his family lived in the Bronx. Not quite a ghetto but it felt like it at times. A gipsy district. Dangerous area. David grew up here, but that didn't prevent him from feeling anxious every time he walked through the neighbourhood.

The walkway was narrow, cars speeding past each other constantly. And there were people standing around at every corner. People drinking in the street, smoking and chatting. Junkies hanging around high off their asses, dealers selling meth or worse. People who were often in a bad mood, and looking for a fight. People eager to shout insults and laugh as David passed by. He'd lost count of how many times he had to avert his eyes, hang his head and just take the insults in stride to avoid getting his ass kicked. He used to get into fights when he was younger but he was old enough now to actually be in danger of getting badly hurt. Not like it was that much of a common occurrence around here, but the local thugs carried knives for sure and bragged about it often enough for David to be cautious.

He got to his home at half past five, unlocked the door, left the shoes in the lobby, and headed straight for his room, but as he was passing around the kitchen, something caught his attention.

Deyl smiled at him: "Good evening, Mr Lacko," he said.

Session 1.

Get a picture

“What are you doing here?” David skipped the greeting.

Mr Deyl was sitting in the kitchen, wearing a shirt without a collar and green trousers, with a polite smile on his face. He looked perfectly at ease, and it was unnerving. A moment later, David’s mother appeared in the kitchen as well, an apron around her neck and a bowl of salad in her hands, which she was mixing vigorously. She beckoned David over: “Where have you been for so long? Come in, sit down, dinner will be done in a minute.”

“What is he doing here?” David pointed an accusing finger at Deyl, feeling more uneasy by the second.

“He came for dinner.”

“So you two are screwing together now, or what?”

He didn’t even believe that, but the words flew out of his mouth before he could stop them. His mind was still reeling from having Deyl appear out of nowhere in his home, he wanted him to get the hell out.

“David!” his mom exclaimed, but she seemed too shocked to continue. David used that as his opportunity to get away, sprinting to his room and slamming the door shut. He expected his sister to be inside, but she was nowhere to be seen.

He threw his bag on the bed and glanced around the room. The walls were covered by posters of *Supernatural*, *Bring Me the Horizon*, *Black Veil Brides*, and other pop-culture staples. Two beds and a desk with a computer, a bookshelf. Two closets, both in disarray with their doors ajar. A bin sitting in the corner, overflowing with trash. Tereza's red jacket lay on a pillow, her bag in the corner of the bed. That meant she was home. David just stood there for a bit, his breathing heavy. He was hoping Tereza would come so that he would have someone sane to talk to, someone who was on his side.

She must be in the kitchen. In the kitchen, with mum, and that jerk.

"David!" his mother shouted.

I don't wanna go there, his mind protested.

He lay on a bed and hid his head under a pillow, curling into a ball.

Everything sucks, he thought. *My whole life sucks.*

He wondered, not for the first time, what it would be like if a car just hit him. Then he'd be dead, and his sister would be crying, and his mom would be crying, and maybe Kristýna would be crying as well. Although, maybe he wouldn't have to straight up die. Maybe he could just end up in the hospital, or in a coma, and Kristýna could come and visit him there.

Stop thinking about such dumb shit, he thought to himself. "Daviiiiid!"

She probably wouldn't stop screaming until he came back. He briefly thought about just ignoring her and staying in his room but in the end he sighed heavily and headed for the

kitchen. The sooner they got this over with the faster Deyl would get out.

The dining table had been dressed up with flower print place mats. Mum made dumplings filled with cabbage and smoked meat. His sister, who was vegetarian, ate only the salad. Their mother accepted her diet by now, though she still insisted that it was just a phase that she would grow out of. David secretly thought so too.

"So, bon appetit," mum proclaimed when food was on the table.

Mr Deyl thanked her profusely and dug into his plate right away. "It is delicious," he assured her.

Fucking brown-noser, David thought bitterly.

"Do you like it? I was afraid I over-salted it."

"Yeah, it's kinda too salty," David mumbled, wanting to provoke her.

Mother smashed her cutlery on the table and hid her head in her hands.

"I don't feel any extra salt there," Deyl assured her.

"Then your taste buds must be completely busted," David scowled at him.

"I doubt that. True, when I was a kid, I was eating some really terrible stuff - frozen pizzas, overcooked pasta. I never cared much about what I was putting in my body. But then I became roommates with a boy who loved cooking, and he was always preparing really big portions, so he'd often feed me too. And after that when I tried something frozen or from a packet again, I discovered that I didn't like it anymore. I stopped using salt, and sugar... Basically, I have completely changed my diet."

"So, what do you eat now then?" Tereza looked at him, seemingly curious.

"I eat in restaurants a lot. I don't really like cooking much, plus I don't spend a lot of time at home."

"Don't you have a wife?" Tereza asked.

"No wife, nor girlfriend, I am completely alone."

"Mum..." David suddenly leaned closer to his mother, "You're wearing make-up!"

"So what?" she blushed.

"So I was right! This is a date!"

"It's not like that. I just invited Mr Deyl for dinner."

"It's true," Deyl admitted. "I wanted to get to know your family better."

"So what, you're gonna be sticking your nose into my private life?"

"I hope not."

"Then what the hell are you doing here? This is my home!"

"Shut up and eat!" his mom snapped at him, trying to regain some control over the situation.

"I won't shut up, see - "

"David, calm down," Tereza said.

He froze and looked at his little sister. Well, she wasn't exactly little anymore. She was short and looked a little chubby, but that was just because her breasts started growing and got pretty big recently. As far as David was concerned, it had been a curse - she couldn't run properly because of them, her back hurt constantly, and her dipshit classmates kept trying to grope her. David couldn't protect her despite being one year older. He tried to defend her in the past, but there were six of them, and even though they

left Tereza alone in the end, David was only a few inches away from being beaten to a pulp.

They went back to eating and everyone was silent for a while. Then Mom suddenly threw her hands up. "Goodness, I almost forgot, would you like to have a beer with the food?" And she was already getting up to get it out of the fridge.

Deyl stopped her with a gesture: "No, thank you, Mrs Lacko. I don't drink beer."

"You don't drink beer?"

"Well... not Czech beer. I don't like it much."

"A Czech who dislikes Czech beer," she was perplexed.

"It is so."

"What do you drink then?"

"I like wine. Or whisky, if I want to treat myself."

"Well... I swear by Czech beer," mom declared.

"Should I get you one?" Tereza asked.

"I don't know if it's appropriate," mom blushed. "I shouldn't be the only one drinking."

"I'll have one with you," David said. He was craving some.

"You can't have any. You're not eighteen yet," mom shot a meaningful glance in Mr Deyl's direction.

"Without meaning any offense," Deyl said, "I would be truly surprised if Mr Lacko hasn't been drinking beer for years already. I got drunk for the first time when I was thirteen myself. What about you, Mrs Lacko?"

"Well, I don't know if I can say."

"Should we guess?" David, already on his way to the fridge, asked. He opened two bottles: one for himself, the second for his mom. He poured mom a glass and drank his straight from the bottle.

"I won't finish it all by myself," mom complained.

"I'll help you," David's sister said and brought a glass for herself as well.

"So when did you get drunk for the first time?" Mr Deyl asked again.

"When I was sixteen," she admitted reluctantly.

"And you?" Deyl turned to Tereza.

"I... well..."

"That's none of your business," David snapped, but before Deyl could react, Tereza said:

"When I was twelve. Mom wasn't at home, so we bought something with David."

David closed his eyes. His stomach was turning just remembering that. He had no friends back then, but his head was already coming up with insane ideas. He wanted to know what it was like to get drunk, so he offered to his sister to get a bottle of rum together, and they were pouring it into themselves like cold water on a hot summer day. They drank it all even though they didn't really like it much. They both puked soon after - David in the toilet, her in the bathtub. Then he put Tereza to bed and went to clean everything and erase any evidence of their shenanigans.

"I know," mom said.

"You know?" both exclaimed in unison.

"Of course. Do you think I'm stupid? The bath was still dirty from vomit and there was a bottle of rum in the bin. It wasn't that hard to put two and two together."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Why would I? You wouldn't listen to anything I had to say. If you want to get drunk, I can't stop you no matter how hard I try."

“So you’d rather just give up the responsibility, huh?” David snapped. It was always the same. Their mother was always too busy with her work, or with doing something around the flat, to pay attention to them. She was too busy to even talk to them normally, only ever barking orders about what needed to be done. Clean your room. Take out the trash. Go get something from the store. There was always something that needed doing, but not a kind word to spare. Whenever either of them had problems in school, she would never hear out their side of the story. No, she would just scold them, annoyed that she had to waste her time going there to clean up their mess.

“How am I giving up responsibility? You are living under my roof, I feed you and clothe you!”

“Of course. You’re truly taking such great care of us. Thanks, I’m not hungry anymore,” David pushed away his unfinished plate and headed for his room. He had tried to push through but he really wasn’t about to sit there and listen to his mother acting like him and Tereza were just a couple of bothersome brats she barely tolerated. They could both go to hell, her and Deyl. Turning on the PC, he launched the old Counter Strike game, getting ready to shoot down a few cops. Maybe that would help and take the edge off.

Half an hour later, Tereza came into the room.

“Is he gone?” he mumbled.

“Yep, he’s gone. And I have to say, you were acting like a real jerk.”

That hurt. “Don’t you start picking on me as well!” David barked and dived deeper into a game. At least he tried to, but his character kept getting killed over and over.

In the reflection of the monitor, he saw his sister changing. She had her back turned to him, but her silhouette hinted at a lot of nice curves. He shut his eyes quickly. His sister was an asexual being to him. Truly, he didn't find her attractive, nor was she sparking sexual fantasies for him like other girls did, but time from time, he had an irresistible desire to look at her. To his own disgust, he realized that at sixteen she already looked like a pornstar, and he wondered if she already had sex with someone. He sincerely hoped not even though he understood that it was none of his business.

Reality

That Friday he tried to have sex with Kristýna.

Their whole class got drunk at the Desert Pub - a lot of them were already eighteen, so it wasn't difficult to get alcohol for the rest. When everyone was sufficiently buzzed, they moved the party to the Seventh Heaven Club. They all danced in a group at first, and David tried his best to send smile after smile Kristýna's way. Koudela was ignoring them for once, too busy picking up girls at the bar. He must have been successful because David hadn't seen him for a while. With the leader of the pack gone, he sensed an opportunity and started buying Kristýna shot after shot, hoping to loosen her up a little. He did that until he ran out of money - he'd have to ask mom for a few hundred later on, but who knows if she'd give him anything. At one point the music shifted to a more slow pace, and David grabbed Kristýna's hands and pulled her close, leading them in a somewhat awkward slow dance. She was rather tipsy already, and didn't argue with leaning on him for support, yet he could feel an air of uncertainty coming from her.

He felt like he should say something, but didn't know what. Finally, he opened his mouth and mumbled: "You have... such beautiful hair."

"What?" she screamed into his ear, and he gave up on trying for conversation, instead attempting to press himself

a bit closer to her. He must have squeezed her too tightly though, because she suddenly pulled back. At the same moment, Dominika swirled in, face heavy with make-up and a neckline cut so low her boobs were practically spilling out. Kristýna immediately threw her hand around Dominika's shoulders, drawing her to dance with them.

David's heart sank. So she doesn't want me.

As Dominika pressed closer to Kristýna, he pulled back. He refused to dance with Dominika.

"What's up?" Kristyna asked.

"He is still sulking," Dominika laughed. "Don't mind him."

"Fuck you," David snapped.

He suddenly felt like he couldn't stay there anymore, he needed to get out, fast. He looked around helplessly for a second and then just sprinted for the door. Once he hit the fresh air outside he felt a little better, though the rejection still stung. He just stood there for a while, hoping that some familiar face might come up and talk to him but no one did. There was no point in coming back there and trying to hit on Kristýna again, and he was out of money to buy a beer somewhere else.

So he went home. He was craving a cigarette, but he was broke, and when he tried asking people for one, everybody ignored him.

He longed for a shot, but he already felt sick.

He vomited in park Lužánky on the way home.

He was sleeping off a hangover for most of the following day.

Session 2.

Confrontation

"I should go," David said and puffed from Maroš's joint again. Their group was standing at the corner of Lužánecký park. It was a nice day outside, mild and sunny, despite it being late autumn with winter knocking at the door soon. They weren't far from the spot where David had vomited the previous Friday, hiding in the bushes from any teachers walking past. Teachers were scarier than the police, who didn't really pay much attention to any weed smokers, no matter their age.

"Yep," Maroš agreed, so high he was barely coherent. "Where to?" he asked almost a minute later while the conversation has already shifted in a different direction.

"To that psycho," Patrick explained. "So piss off, David. You're supposed to be there in five minutes."

"How do you know?" David was surprised.

"How couldn't I? You've told us like three fucking times already."

"You really should go," Kristyna agreed though she, unlike Patrick, sounded actually worried. "It's no joke, you're on parole, right?"

And David finally admitted to himself that it really was no joke. He just really didn't want to go there and talk to that

asshole again. Taking one last puff he surrendered to his unfortunate fate and passed the joint on. Running for the next tram he set in the direction of Šilínrovo náměstí where Deyl's office was.

He got to the empty waiting room with a fifteen-minute delay, but he spent another minute helplessly standing in front of the door, gathering the courage to knock.

"Come in," he heard from the inside after he finally gave the door a few raps.

Deyl was sitting behind a table with a book in his hand. "Mr Lacko!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "Excellent, come in. Can I get you anything? Coffee? Tea?"

"No, thanks," David mumbled awkwardly and sat in the chair opposite him. "Sorry I'm late."

"Hmmm... So you are aware that you're coming late," Deyl acknowledged.

"Well, yeah," David shrugged.

"How is that possible?" the man sounded sincerely curious.

David didn't understand: "How is what possible?"

"How is it possible you're late," Deyl explained.

"I couldn't make it."

"Ah," Deyl tapped his lip with a finger in wonder. "Does it happen to you often that you can't make it?"

"What do you mean?"

"If it happens to you often that you're late."

"Kinda, yeah."

"When did it begin?"

"Sorry?" David felt almost dizzy with discomfort and the coach's questions were making no sense to him. He desperately wished to just get out and go for a walk.

"When did you start coming places late?"

“Don’t know,” he scratched his neck nervously. Seriously, what was up with these questions? “I’ve always been late.”

“Truly? Have you been born late?”

David laughed despite himself. “How should I know? Probably not. Never asked.”

“And as a little kid, have you been often late as well?”

“Don’t know, how am I supposed to remember that? What’s with all this prodding?”

“Hm...” Deyl went quiet for a while, pondering something. “I don’t want to hassle you. I’m just trying to point to the fact that human behaviour is never a matter of ‘It’s always been like this’. Very few things are like that. We can be born with a birthmark. We are born with the ability to breathe. Anything else is learned. Types of behaviour aren’t a part of us since birth, no, we learn them somewhere along the way. I’m trying to say that even though you are often late, it is only up to you to change that.”

“I can’t change it. I’m just like that.”

“Ah. What a beautiful lie you are telling yourself.”

“I’m not lying to myself,” David was about to start arguing with him, but Roland stopped him before he could open his mouth:

“Let’s stop this right here and now. This discussion is pointless. We are going to meet again tomorrow at four o’clock and I guarantee that you will be on time.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it.”

“I would,” Deyl stretched out his hand, an annoyingly polite smile firm on his face.

“How much?” David lifted his chin defiantly. This guy couldn’t be serious.

“How much do you want?”

“One grand.”

“That means one thousand, right?”

“Yep, that is one bloody thousand,” David emphasized and just barely stopped himself from adding: You twat.

“All right... if you won’t be on time tomorrow, you will get a thousand crowns from me. In cash. At least I know you will come to collect it. But if you will be here on time, I want you to promise to finish this whole course and that you will follow all of my instructions.”

David hesitated only for a moment before firmly grasping the offered hand and shaking it.

Easy money, he thought for the rest of the day, face smug.

He will try to trick me for sure, he wondered during his Czech class the next day, trying to come up with possible scenarios in his head.

There’s no way he can make me be there on time, he told himself during Maths, watching the clock on the wall strike ten o’clock.

“What’s he gonna do, drag me there by force? He could never get away with that,” he boasted to Patrick during PE.

I will go to Lužánky park after school, he decided during English class. Zdeněk had brought a water pipe, and they were planning to bring it by the fountain and chill there for the afternoon.

I will get there around half past four, he smirked during Biology class.

In the end, there were eight of them who went to Lužánky. They put money together to buy two liters of white wine. David didn’t chip in because his mom had refused to give him any money. “You won’t get any then,” they told him, but

then sent the bottle his way anyway. It was shaping up to be a good day.

At a quarter past three, his mom called him out of nowhere: "David, do you know where Tereza is?"

"No clue, why?"

"We were supposed to meet up and go shopping, but she didn't show up and she's not picking up her phone."

"Well... I dunno, maybe she had just forgotten or something. She's probably with a friend somewhere."

"Could you try calling her, please? I'm worried about her."

"All right," David said and tried calling his sister, but she wasn't picking it up. He didn't text his mom about it; he wanted to, but the bottle had been passed to him, followed by a good conversation about politics, so it completely slipped his mind.

At quarter to four, Tereza called him back; it took him a while to notice that his phone was ringing. "Well, what's up?"

"Good day, Mr Lacko," Deyl answered from the other side of the phone.

"Deyl?" David exclaimed, too stunned to say anything else.

"I'm here with Tereza and both of us would love to talk with you. Terka came to me to discuss something, and I convinced her to share it with you as well. Are you alone?"

"Yeah, yeah," David answered as he was getting up to get away from the others and find a more private spot. The whole situation was making him nervous. "What's this all about?"

"She wants your help."

"What help? Give her the phone," he was automatically heading further and further away from his classmates.

“David?” he heard Tereza’s voice from the other side of the phone. She sounded very distressed. “David, please, hurry up. He... picked me up after school by car, said he needed help with something, and I went with him - “

“What? Where are you?”

“I don’t know! He drugged me with something, and when I woke up, it was dark all around, and he keeps smiling in such a creepy way - David, I’m scared.”

A Scream sounded from the other side of the phone, followed by a strange hum.

“You should hurry, David,” Deyl whispered. His voice sounded slimy. “I truly hope you will be here on time.”

And then he hung up.

“You son of a bitch!” David screamed into the silent phone. He stopped thinking after that, he just ran. It was about two kilometers to Šilingrovo náměstí so he needed to hurry if he was gonna make it in time. If he took the tram it could get stuck in traffic, so he just sprinted as fast as he could. And as he was running, he realized that it was a trap. It was a set-up so that he would get to the office on time, but he heard how scared Tereza sounded. She sounded absolutely terrified, and he felt more worried than ever before in his life. Because mom didn’t know about any of this, and Deyl had finally shown his true colours: he was a fucking perv.

He bounded up the stairs in the building, taking two at a time, almost falling on his face more than once. The waiting room was empty. He charged into the office without knocking.

Tereza and Deyl were sitting at the table, coffee mugs in hand, chatting without a care in the world.

“Good afternoon,” Deyl smiled at him with his usual polite smile and Tereza did too: “Hi, David,” she said.

It all hit him then. “You were in cahoots with him,” he realized, his heart sinking.

“Exactly,” she laughed, unbothered by his growing anger. “And mom as well.”

“You bitch!” he screamed, just barely restraining himself from kicking something. “Do you have any idea how afraid I was?”

The perv spoke up then: “I am happy to note that you are on time, Mr Lacko. You’re even five minutes early. So, do you still think that you cannot change?”

“Fuck you,” David growled and turned to leave.

“I won!” Deyl raised his voice. “You have to stay.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You’re right, you don’t, that was a truly unfortunate expression of mine, I apologise. But you have promised to finish the course with me. This is our second meeting because the one from yesterday doesn’t count. Or should I take this as you breaking another promise?”

“The hell you mean, another?” David shouted. His

“Your first promise was to be here yesterday at four o’clock. And you were not.”

Instead of answering, David opted to scream out his anger: “You set me up!”

“Yes. Because I wanted to show you that one can do anything. You can do anything. You can even be on time if it comes to it.”

“You lied to me!”

“When?”

“You said Tereza wants to talk to me about something.”

“I do,” Tereza joined the conversation. She looked serious all of a sudden. “I want the brother I love back. Because who you have become is unbearable. And I really don’t know what your issue is, but I want my caring and kind brother back, not this walking black hole that tears apart anything that comes its way. I’m starting to be afraid of you! I’m just waiting for the day when you start hitting mum. But she doesn’t deserve that. And I don’t either. So please… Please! Stay with Roland. Pass his course. He really only wants to help.”

She just as well could have put a shotgun to his heart and pulled the trigger. And nothing was left of him but an empty husk of a body flailing in the wind, blood dripping down his shirt. He felt tears welling up in his eyes. It was all too much. But he won’t allow them to see him cry, he won’t. So David turned away and ran out.

Still session 2.

Theory

David was bracing himself on the sink in the bathroom in the corridor, letting cold water splash over his face, desperately trying to stop the tears. Fuck, he didn't want to cry, he didn't want to! Feeling anger boiling through his entire body he hit the wall several times with his fist, not with his full strength, but still enough to make his knuckles bleed.

Why is this happening? Why, why, why?

Pain and anger were storming through his body, fluxes of energy he didn't understand, neither knew how to handle. He wanted to run but knew how dumb it would be, he wanted to kick something but was lacking a target. For the most part, he wanted to curl up in a ball and cry, but that would be pathetic.

He was strong. And he would stay strong.

I won't break down. Not me. I will never break down. I have to take care of Tereza.

What did she mean by being afraid of me? Or whatever the hell she was saying...

He washed his face again and looked at the watch on his wrist. It used to be his dad's. Twenty minutes after four already. Dammit. How long has he been in here, hiding like a coward?

It's time to pull your shit together, man. It's time to face the music.

"As you wish," he whispered. "As you fucking wish."

Filled with a newfound sense of determination, David left the bathroom. Tereza's words were still ringing in his ears. He didn't want to talk to Deyl so soon after he saw him in a moment of weakness, but he knew that it was better to get it over with. The waiting room had been empty when he entered it, but the office door remained open.

Deyl was sitting behind the desk, reading. Tereza was gone.

David entered the room and sat opposite him. Deyl ignored him, seemingly engrossed in his book. *A Knight in Rusty Armor*, the title said. Written by someone name *Fischer* - David couldn't read the first name, the other man's hand was covering it.

They just sat like for some time, Deyl still reading his book, turning a page after a bit, while David looked around. Outside, the sun was slowly setting down. Little particles of dust were floating in the air around them, highlighted by the sun shining in through the window. The silence was starting to grow thicker. Finally, David couldn't endure it any more. "Is it really so good that you didn't even notice me yet?"

Deyl looked at him over the edge of the book. "It is really good. One of the best novels I've ever read. I make a habit of returning to it regularly to remind myself of what it's trying to tell me."

"What is it about?"

"About a man who is pretending to be something he's not but isn't aware of it. But he gets it in the end. Would you like to read it?"

“Maybe,” David replied.

“I’m going to give it to you... if you’re going to promise that you will read it. Will you?”

“I don’t want it.”

“Pity. I would like as many people as possible to read it.”

“I want to read it,” David explained quickly, feeling somewhat awkward. “But I don’t wanna take it from you.”

“You don’t want to owe me. I can understand that. How about borrowing it then?” He closed the book and passed it to him.

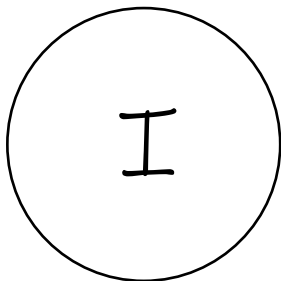
“Thanks,” David said and put the book in his bag. Then, he looked at Deyl. “What happens now?”

Deyl shrugged. “How about we stop addressing each other so formally?”

“All right,” David said and they shook hands.

“I would like to introduce you to something,” Deyl said and approached the whiteboard that was standing by the window.

He drew a circle and wrote the letter I inside it.



“This is what we are when we are born. Pure and empty. But as we grow older, we experience different events. For example, when we touch fire and get burned, we start to believe that fire burns. Such beliefs are based on facts, on our senses, on something we can touch. That’s how we learn. Something will happen and we will draw a conclusion out of it. This is called **generalisation** - once we find out that fire burns, we expect it automatically and believe it is like that all the time. But it doesn’t have to be like that all time.”

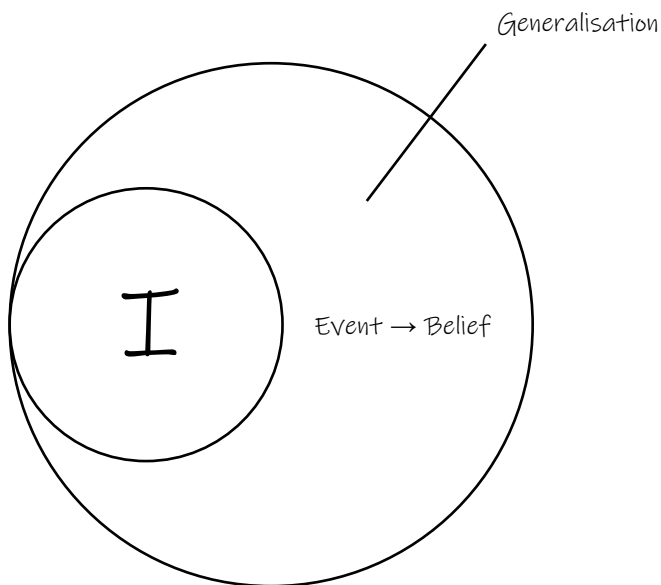
What a strange statement, David thought, and asked: “Fire doesn’t always burn?”

“I don’t know, admittedly I am no scientist. But let’s say that you learn that doors always open inward... and it is always so until you encounter a door that opens outward. Or you learn that all tigers are orange with black stripes - until you find out albino tigers exist. As far as I’m concerned, there are no rules. Nothing is absolute.

Yet I repeat - the concept of generalization allows us to learn, thus it is necessary. Without generalization, we would be wondering what to do with every door handle we encountered in our life, figuring out how to press it as if we saw it for the first time.

The risk lies in assuming something has to be a certain way just because it is like that usually. Like saying ‘I’m always late’,” he smiled then, but David did not consider it funny. It felt like he was being mocked but he decided to let it pass this time.

Roland turned back to the whiteboard and added more things to his drawing:



Then he paused briefly before continuing.

“There are two other mechanisms of the brain influencing our cognition. One is called **distortion**. Basically, you make a connection between two unrelated events. For example, if you are going to get a bad grade in Math, you assume you are stupid. Or that you suck at Math.”

“I don’t get it,” David said.

“Follow me. Is the event of getting a bad grade from Math signifying you are stupid? No, in reality, it means only one thing: that you got a bad grade from Math.”

“If I was smart, I would get a good grade.”

“Is our intelligence measured by our expertise in Math? I consider myself to be a clever person, but I suck at Math. Do you know this joke? An elephant, a snake, a squirrel and a hummingbird get a task in class to climb up a tree. The squirrel is up in a sec, and gets an A. The snake is the second to get up after her, and he gets a B. The hummingbird flies up and gets an F because he cheated. The elephant takes the tree down using his enormous strength. Their different qualities are rated in the same grading system and the teacher thinks: the squirrel is smart, the snake a little less so, the hummingbird is a cheater, and the elephant is stupid.

It’s the same with people: we get the same task and we are graded by our success. Yet our success doesn’t signify whether we are smart or stupid. It signifies only if we are able to fulfill the task that was given. Because even the elephant is able to get on the tree in the end. He only climbs it when it’s on the ground. As far as I’m concerned, the elephant is a genius. He found his own way to complete the task.”

David smiled. It reminded him of the one time he wrote “1 and 1 is 11” on his Math test, because the teacher hadn’t used the “+” symbol in the instructions. Of course, this led to him being called “stupid” by the teacher in front of the whole class, even though he was just teasing her. Arguing was pointless at that time, he was still a kid, and his mom scolded him as well for provoking the teacher. “You do what they tell you to!” she yelled at him. “Don’t be a smartass!”

“I think I get it,” he said.

“Excellent,” Roland said. “So, once again, this mechanism is called distortion and it can actually serve us as well: it’s a tool of creativity. Thanks to it, humanity is so inventive. Who would ever think about connecting a pen and a pineapple, right? Or about putting wheels on a suitcase. And so on.”

“I think you will grasp the last mechanism the fastest,” Roland continued. “Deletion. It’s a defense mechanism our mind uses; it allows us to forget unpleasant experiences. For example, a mother can forget the pain she felt during childbirth. Yet, way too often, we use this mechanism to forget things which don’t fit our needs. Right? For example, you forget you are supposed to be at a meeting at four o’clock, because you don’t want to go there.”

David smirked. “Maybe,” he said even though he knew very well he was supposed to be there at four.

“Let’s try a simple example,” Roland continued. “If my girlfriend tells me: ‘You never compliment my clothes.’ Which concept do we see there?”

“Are you testing me?”

“I’m making sure you understand the theory. I will not be grading you.”

"Ech. All right," David sighed, and even though he disliked it, he looked at the board. "Generalization, I guess?"

"Why?"

"Because it feels weird to me that I would never compliment a girl's dress. If I don't know how to approach a chick, I compliment her outfit. Or hair. Or smile."

"Yes. Most probably, I had complimented her clothes at some point in our relationship. Do you think a different mechanism can be at play here?"

"Well, if you complimented her dress before, then deletion," David was starting to enjoy this game.

"Yes. How about distortion, do you think it's in there as well?"

No matter how David looked at the scenario, he couldn't see it there. "Well... no, I don't think so?"

"It is not very visible, true. But in this case, I would assume that she is hiding something unspoken behind the statement. If I were to oversimplify it: 'You didn't compliment my dress, therefore you don't like me anymore.'"

"Only women can think like that," David sneered.

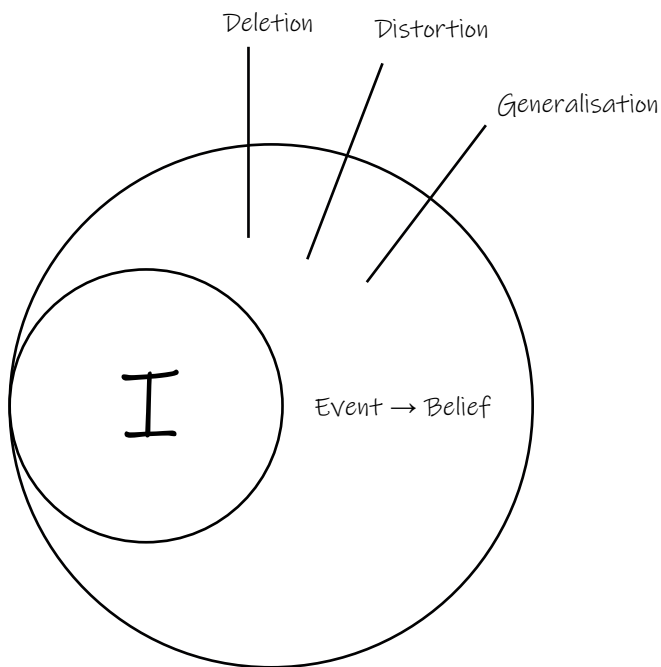
"Really? Haven't you ever thought in a similar way?"

David gulped. He suddenly remembered Kristýna pulling away from him last Friday, and how that made him think that she doesn't want him.

Kristýna.

His heart sunk, and his mind drifted briefly to darker places.

"All of these - generalization, distortion, and deletion - are natural and often useful mechanisms," Roland continued. "Yet, if we are not aware of them, they can lead us to unfortunate consequences. To something we call negative be-



liefs. They are created when we put two and two together and get seventeen. When your mom smacks you and you decide it means that she doesn't love you: **distortion**. When you forget all the moments in which she expressed her love for you: **deletion**. And when you decide that all adults are just like your mother - authorities who are just trying to hurt you: **generalization**. That's how we form our **negative beliefs**." He added more things on the whiteboard.

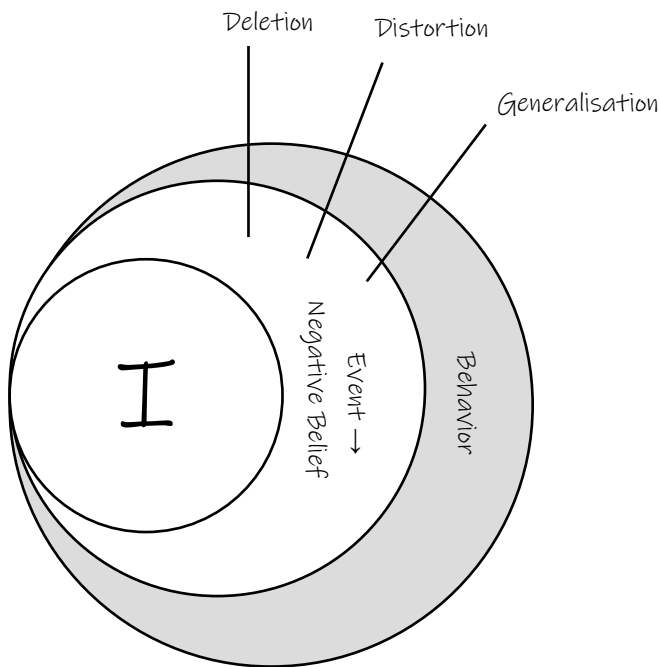
"What I'm going to say now is only my assumption," Roland emphasized. "My own distortion, when I will be putting together things which don't have to be related. My assumption is that you have a lot of negative beliefs about yourself and the world around you. I want to show you that all you are doing is lying to yourself and others."

David looked at Roland with a passive expression on his face. He didn't say a word but thought to himself: I'm not lying to myself about anything. *What the hell do you know, you bloody smartass?*

"You lied when you said that you always come late because that's just how you are. That was a belief formed by coming late often. **Generalization**. But I'm sure it is not *always* like that. You simply intentionally forgot the times when you did come on time. **Deletion**. And finally, **distortion**, since you inferred that 'that's just how you are' because you come late often. Yet, late arrivals are not what you are. It's what you do."

He drew another circle on the board.

"Our beliefs and negative beliefs lead to certain behaviours. But our **behaviour** is only what we exhibit, not what we are," he double-tapped the inner circle.



"It doesn't make sense," David objected.

"Let's try an example," Roland replied, his tone patient. "Let's say you get angry and smash a plate on the ground. Does that make you a man who smashes plates on the floor?"

"Yes."

"No. You're still David, not the 'man who smashes plates on the floor.' How many plates have you smashed in your life?"

"I've dropped many."

"Sure. But how many did you smash intentionally?"

"Don't know, probably none."

"So let's say it was your first one. In the end, you are still 'David' plus also somebody who 'at the given moment smashed a plate on the ground.' That's it. Nothing more and nothing less. In the eyes of other people, generalization takes root. David once smashed a plate in rage, so David is a man who always smashes plates on the ground. But reality differs from what they think. Because in reality, you only smashed a plate on the ground once."

David was searching for a loophole, hoping to prove Roland wrong. "What if I would be doing it regularly?"

"Then you would be a person who many times in the past smashed plates on the ground. In an ideal case, we would use specific numerals. 'David smashed plates on the ground twenty times in his life.' So what. That doesn't necessarily mean that you are going to do it for the twenty-first time. There is a greater chance, sure, but it is not given. It simply means that you were smashing plates on the ground in the past. It can be different in the future. You can make a choice to not smash the plate, but to put it back on the shelf.

You are not your behaviour. You are exhibiting a behaviour, and you 'live in it', but you *are not* your behaviour, because if you were, it would mean that you will always be behaving the same in the future. Which you can of course, but don't have to. You have the power to change it. It might not be easy, but you have the power. We are not our behaviour. You are not your behaviour, David. You are you, nothing more, nothing less."

They were looking at each other for a moment. A clock was ticking in David's brain. He wasn't sure if he understood it all. He didn't know if he agreed with it. But there was one thing he liked about the whole thing. If it was really true - the ticking clock suddenly rang twelve - it meant that he could change. So, he asked the following question: "Can I take a picture?"

"Please, do," Roland smiled. "I believe it's time to end it for today anyway. Let's meet again next week at four, and I would appreciate it if you weren't late this time. In the meantime, I have some homework for you. If you want to truly grasp this," he gestured to the whiteboard, "you need to practice it. Try to discover at least one generalization, one distortion, and one deletion, that you are doing every day. And when you find it, ask yourself if it's doing you any good or not."

"All right," David said. "And what if I'm not sure about something? What if... what if I think that somebody is angry at me because they are frowning?"

"You ask them: 'Are you angry at me?' The best way to get the answer is to ask."

Reality

Day after day, the life of a student is always the bloody same, David thought to himself as he stood in the corridor during a school break. He was leaning on a handrail on the first floor, staring down as the stairs filled with students running out for lunch.

His daily life was an endless torture of dependence on people who raised him, on laws he didn't agree with, on rules he didn't sign, but had no power of breaking. It was an endless jungle of a school environment, where the strong feasted on the weak, while observed idly by authorities. And those authorities were performing their own acts of cruelty on the ones assigned to their frustrated care. There were people who he called friends out of a lack of other words, knowing very well it had very little to do with real friendship.

It was a constant fear of making a mistake, not only in tests, but mainly on the social battlefield that he had to constantly walk as an involuntary pawn controlled by some higher force of a chess player. Either it was politicians, or god, or whatever crazed hand that was running the system he had been born into. It was a life of bullies laughing at the ones who currently fall in disfavour of the community, which he joined both out of spite and fear of being ostracized. Nobody liked to be an outsider and he was dangling on the edge of falling into the trap of inescapable bullying. But better to be a bully than be bullied.

He saw Kristýna walking down the stairs, and leaned slightly forward to sneak a look down her shirt. He noted with excitement that a bit of her bra was peeking out. She was followed by that slutty bitch Dominika and David wondered if they were really friends. They spent a lot of time together, and sat at the same desk very often, even though it was Lucie who was supposedly Kristýna's best friend.

This whole group, he wondered, are they really friends, or just unwilling acquaintances who don't have an opportunity to choose? They hang out together in their free time, but would they do it also if there were more options to choose from?

He knew they were part of other groups as well. Koudela and his friends from football. Zdeněk and his scouts. Kristýna and her dancing group. There were probably more, and with that, David realized that he didn't really know that much about the life of his classmates outside of school. Maybe all of them had some groups they felt a part of, and only he was missing one.

Or maybe they really liked each other, and it was only David who was sticking to them out of lack of better options.

Maybe he didn't know anything. He didn't know if anybody from the class cared about him. He didn't know why his mother was constantly on the edge with him. Damn, he didn't even know about the relationships in class. Nobody looked like they were dating, even though Koudela acted as though he was screwing with almost every girl from class, and most of them didn't seem to mind.

Maybe he should listen to Roland's advice and just... start asking.

Generalisation

David was sitting behind the kitchen table, sipping a cup of tea next to his mum, an unreadable expression on his face. He had been observing his mother's heavy scowl for the past two minutes. "Are you angry?" he asked finally.

"What?" she grunted.

"Nothing..." David turned his attention to his phone quickly. He didn't want to provoke her, she seemed really angry.

"No, tell me, what were you asking?"

"Don't worry about it."

She slapped her palm on the table and stood up to go and wash the dishes.

"What have I done this time?" David asked, his own anger spiked by the angry outburst.

"First you ask me something, and then you pretend like I don't exist at all."

"And that's why you are angry?"

"Yes, because you are doing it all the time."

The phrase 'all the time' rang a bell in his head. "That's a generalization," David realized out loud.

"What?"

"Well... I'm not actually doing it all the time."

"Yes, you are," mum exclaimed bitterly, but David wasn't deterred and tried to explain again:

"Well, we talked during dinner right? So I can't be doing it all the time."

"All right, maybe not all the time, but you do it often, and I have no idea why."

"Well, I didn't want to..." David scratched his head, "I didn't want to provoke you," he finished sheepishly.

"You weren't provoking me," his mother sighed.

"But I saw you were angry at me and I didn't know why," David exclaimed.

"I wasn't angry at you, why would you think that?"

"Because you are frowning."

"I have a migraine."

"Oh..." Suddenly, he felt terribly sorry the argument happened at all. "Should I bring you some painkillers?"

"No, I'll just go to lie down in a bit," she said and turned back to the dishes.

"Then go to lie down, I'll do it."

"That's all right, I can handle it."

"Come on. When was the last time you saw me do the dishes?"

His mother paused, and said: "Well, that's true, you never wash the dishes..."

"Generalization," David grumbled under his breath and smiled.

Deletion

They were sitting in the park by Špilberk with some guys from class, drinking under the full moon. David was in a bad mood - his mom gave him some money and he sacrificed them all to get a whiskey for the group. Patrick drank most of it, of course.

“What’s the matter with you?” Patrick asked when he noticed that David wasn’t joining in the discussion about Witcher 3 despite it being one of his favourite video games. “Nothing.”

They conquered the gazebo which stood at the top of the hill, looking down at the shining city lights surrounding them from all directions. Everyone was in a good mood, drinking and chatting while huddling in their jackets and happily ignoring all passersby who shot them disapproving glances. The autumn was mild but winter was getting closer, and their times of sitting outside until three am were slowly coming to an end.

“Drop the act,” Patrick pressed on, “I can tell you’re pissed off.”

“Yes,” David admitted, “I’m pissed off ,cause I’m broke again. I’m always paying for you.”

“The hell are you on about? We were buying last time.”

“When was the last time?”

“On Thursday, arsehole. When we were in Lužánky.”

“You collected money from everyone for that,” David complained. “I paid for the whole whiskey today.”

“And did you ask us to contribute?” Patrick exhaled. “Is it my fault that the maestro is a big shot who has some cash and wants to pay it all himself?!”

“What are you talking about? You said you were broke!”

“No, I said that I’m running out of money. Ok, here’s a fifty for you. Guys, give him something as well.” Suddenly, David held three hundred in his hands. “And forget about us paying for you next time,” Patrick added.

“Like you ever pay for me,” David snapped.

“And what about all that booze you drank at my party, huh?” Patrick retaliated.

“Well of course, play the victim when your parents are the ones paying.”

“Are you daft?” Patrick knocked on his head in amazement. “I had to buy it all with my own money, do you think they wouldn’t find out if we drank their entire stash? Do you think they wouldn’t mind? That’s why there was a box for money so that everyone would pitch in. I bet you didn’t put anything in there.”

Most probably, David really didn’t. He didn’t recall any box being anywhere... even though thinking about it now he remembered how absurd he found the thought of giving any money to Patrick since he had everything for free anyway. Now, everything was starting to make sense.

David shut his mouth. “Sorry,” he said after a while. “I didn’t realize that it was like that.”

“All right then,” Patrick calmed down, obviously satisfied with David’s show of remorse. “And pass me the whiskey, I paid for it, so I can drink.”

“Here...” David passed him the fifty back. “Take it. All of you, take it back.”

“Bollocks,” Patrick decided. “Keep it. So you remember it for next time.”

Distortion

He was sitting with Kristýna on a bench, fidgeting all over, nervous like a nun in a brothel. They went for a walk after school, because Kristýna's dance lesson got canceled and she didn't tell anybody at home. It was a beautiful day. Why not have some fun?

"Spit it out already," she grumbled.

"What should I spit out?"

"You're acting like there's a squirrel in your trousers. What are you so nervous about?"

"I'm not nervous," he lied. "I... was just wondering if you and Koudela are dating now."

"No," she answered, appalled, almost offended. "Where did you get that idea?"

"Well... I saw you two holding hands."

"So what? If I dated everyone whose hand I held, I could go to work at Moulin Rouge."

"So you are not dating anybody then?" he exhaled, a flicker of hope rising in his chest only to be immediately shot down:

"I didn't say that."

"Who then?"

"You don't know him. He lives next door."

"Oh." He went silent, and then he gathered whatever leftover courage he still had in him and stuttered out: "I would like to date you some day."

"I know," she said.

"You know?"

"Of course. It's as obvious as a penguin in the desert."

"Well, I don't know about the obvious. A penguin in a desert is probably dead."

“Whatever. Come here,” she said and embraced him. Feeling her pressed up against him like this made his body react before his mind could and he instantly felt mortified. It felt like heaven and hell at once, just holding her for a minute like that. Then, she pulled back and continued: “You’re sweet, David. I don’t understand why you are so shy, you could have so many girls. If you would stop acting like a jerk all the time.”

He almost jumped away from her. “What do you mean by that?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes it feels like you are not really present. As if you were constantly in a different universe. And you’re weird in general.”

She is right, he thought. I am weird. And he knew he didn’t understand the world. It didn’t make any sense to him.

Session 3.

Image

David entered the office slouched, with hands in his pockets. “Hi,” he muttered in Roland’s direction. The office looked cosy as ever and a new sentence hung on the wall:

What are you pretending to be?

Welcome, David,” Roland said, heading for the kitchen. “Coffee?”

“Yes,” David answered. “Won’t you have one too?” he asked when Roland sat opposite to him with only one cup in hand.

“If I drank coffee with every one of my clients, I would be crawling up the walls at the end of the day. Tell me, how was your week?”

“All right,” David mumbled. He didn’t really know what else to tell him.

“Have you done your homework?”

“Yes,” David nodded. “Distortion, deletion, generalization... I saw it everywhere. People are so full of shit. For example, my mum always automatically assumes that I’m mad.”

“Of course. And what do you automatically assume?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Nothing.”

“Really? What assumptions are you making right now?”

“None.”

“Have you no expectations from our meeting?”

“Well, just one,” David smirked. “I assume that you will have tons of questions.”

“So you do assume something automatically. And I automatically assume that you have assumptions. Let’s get on with it, then. I will need you to follow my instructions now.”

“All right.”

“Sit up straight in the chair.”

Despite being a little bit annoyed by the request, David obeyed.

“Your back should be touching the backrest, but not leaning on it. Knees at a right angle, your feet on the ground.”

David adjusted his position reluctantly.

“Now close your eyes. Close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Inhale deeply – and exhale sharply. Inhale deeply – and now exhale slowly.”

David wondered what the hell was this supposed to achieve, but complied with the instructions. *Probably some sort of meditation*, he thought. The internet was full of ads promising its effectiveness and life changing clarity. What a bunch of nonsense. A snide remark was forming at the tip of his tongue, but then he remembered what he promised: to follow Roland’s orders. So he held still and kept on breathing like Roland instructed, even though he thought it pointless.

“One more deep breath... and continue breathing at your own pace. Now, imagine that it’s a day just like any other.

Autumn is coming, leaves are full of colours, and the wind is cold and keeps getting under your jacket. You get to school, take off your coat, change your shoes, and head for class.”

David listened to the other man’s words and tried to imagine what Roland was describing. It wasn’t that hard in the end. His mind painted a picture, drawing from his memory; he was hiding his head in between his shoulders to protect himself from the freezing cold wind and persistent drizzle, quickening his steps to get indoors as soon as possible. He got to school and quickly changed his shoes because the bell was going to ring in a minute.

“You get to class. What does it look like there? How do the others see you?”

Everyone is looking at him.

The stares are unbearable.

They either mock him or just look annoyed. Of course, David is late again. Mrs Kolářová is sitting behind her desk, her ugly red glasses perched on the tip of her nose, and she gets to ridiculing him right off the bat. “Mr Lacko, late as always. Tell me, have you ever considered working for pyrotechnicians?”

“What, like defusing bombs?”

“No, but perhaps you could be sold to terrorists so their bombs would always go off with delay. So what are you waiting for, an invitation? Sit down, and try not to sleep through the whole lesson this time.”

“Open your eyes, take a pencil and paper, and draw what you see.”

The image of the classroom shattered into pieces as the memory faded. It didn’t matter. David lived through it many times already. It kept playing on repeat in the back of his

mind in class, during breaks, when he walked home. I came and went, by now he knew it well, down to the tiniest detail, polished and sparkling, resembling a diamond full of revolution. He opened his eyes. His breathing felt a little ragged but he schooled his expression to seem calm. He hoped it worked.

Roland asked him to draw the scene. But how could he?

"I don't know how to draw," he said.

"I am not asking you to paint me the Mona Lisa. Just scribble something. And if you don't know how, then write it. Express it with words. Writing is a form of drawing anyway."

"All right." David held a pen, tapping his lips with it. His mind didn't feel fully present in the moment, like a part of him was floating somewhere in space. "How they see me..." he mumbled to himself.

"Don't think about it too much. Simply draw or write the first things that come to mind."

"Okay..." and so he began to draw. He scribbled a few lines, his heart heavy, and a feeling of unease washed over him as he saw what was coming from below the tip of his pen.

"Ready," he said eventually, and added: "I told you I can't draw."

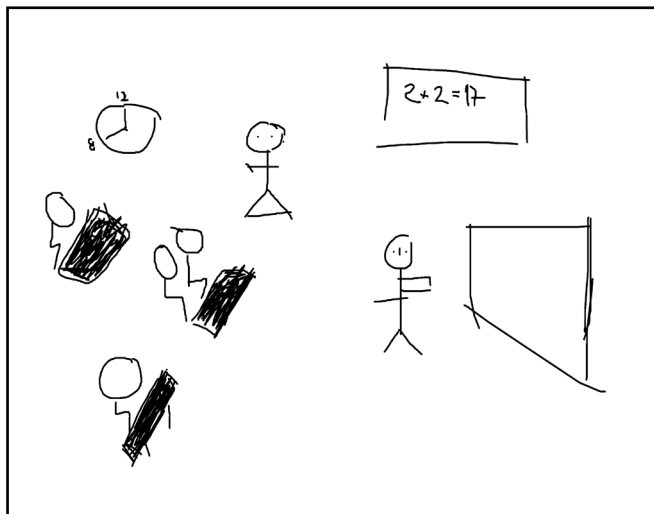
"All right," Roland nodded. David expected a comment about his drawing skills, but none came. Instead, Roland asked: "And which one are you?"

David pointed at the figure on the right. "This is me. Coming late to class."

"That's how you perceive yourself? As somebody who always comes late?"

"That's how the others see me," he explained.

"Ah. But you know that you are not always late, don't you?"



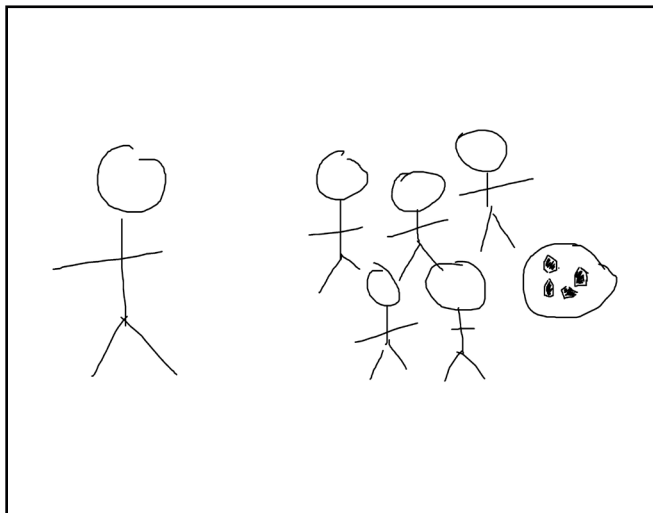
“No, not always,” David admitted with a hint of annoyance. This endless repetition of the same thing felt somewhat fake, as if Roland believed that he can turn something into reality by saying it often enough.

“Excellent. Can you draw something else for me? What else do your classmates see you as?”

David didn’t know what to do for a while. Why was Roland asking him? Wouldn’t it be better to ask his classmates? But an image flew in unexpectedly, and David decided to just follow it, a sore bitterness in his heart.

“I’m the one on the left,” he explained, as he passed the picture to Roland. “We are getting ready to play football. They always choose me last.”

“How come?”



“Because I’m a bad player,” David laughed bitterly. He wasn’t so bad. He simply wasn’t that good, nor that popular.

“Ah. Does it happen often that you stand aside?”

“Don’t know,” David grumbled. “I guess.”

He felt like it was happening all the time. When they had to pair up for assignments. When it came to hanging out. When forming groups. When it came to being selected for something. When there was a chance to be first, you bet he would come out last. At least it felt like it.

All the time, he thought. Generalization.

But generalization or not, it felt like that, and it sucked.

“For example?” Roland asked.

“Don’t know,” David repeated. He didn’t feel like answering, like explaining anything, how could he even explain something so complicated?

“So if you were to somehow characterize this little figure, what would it be called?” David tapped on David’s scribble of himself.

The word was at the tip of David’s tongue immediately, sour and heavy. He wanted to spit it out and be rid of the bad taste but at the same time, he felt afraid. “A loser,” he choked out finally.

“Ah. So your classmates perceive you as a loser?”

The tone of Roland’s voice remained strictly neutral. How did he do that? How did he always appear so stoic, so distant, so uninterested? David tried to look calm as well, but his whole body was tensing up, and his hand shook lightly.

“I guess so.”

“But you are not a loser,” announced Roland.

“I probably am,” he sighed, trying and failing to appear nonchalant. I don’t care what others think about me, he tried reassuring himself, but the words rang hollow even in the comfort of his own mind. He tried to pretend that he didn’t care but he did. Now his knee was starting to shake too. He tried to put his hand on it to stop it but it didn’t work. It felt as though his insides were slowly falling apart, bit by bit.

“How can you say that?”

“I am a loser. I get picked last all the time. Nobody wants to talk to me, or sit next to me in class.”

“Nobody?”

He remembered Kristýna, sitting at the park bench with him and chatting happily. “Not really. But they always pick me last.”

“Always?”

“Stop it.”

“But you see what you’re doing, right?”

“All right, damn it. Yes, I am generalizing.”

“Correct. So people do sit with you and talk to you sometimes, and you don’t always get picked last. You are not a loser. At most, you act like one.”

“So I act like a loser.”

“Okay. But you are not your behaviour. You exhibit behaviour. And that’s the difference.”

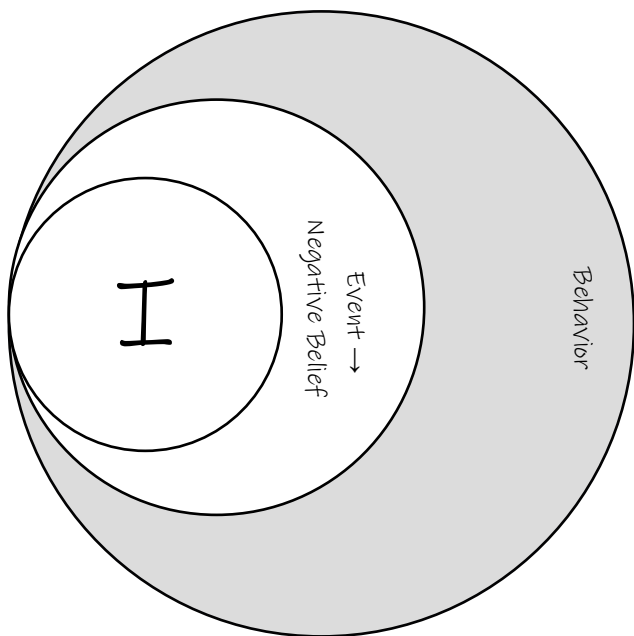
It didn’t make any sense to David. He thought of all the times his mum would reprimand and lecture him about how he should act. There was a particular saying she loved to use, and he repeated it to Roland with bitterness in his voice: “I thought that actions are supposed to speak louder than words.”

Roland sighed. “Well, fair enough. If you would want to take perspective – and I am not sure if I adopt it myself – I would say that your behaviour speaks about what you are in the moment you are exhibiting the behaviour. It doesn’t speak of what you were in the past, nor of what you will be in the future, it’s simply about the present. And even that is thwarted by the labels created by language, and language is a very tricky and dangerous tool.”

David blinked. “What?”

“Yeah, I am getting entangled in it. Let me explain why this keeps happening to you. Why you often perceive yourself as a loser, or exhibit behaviour which you call the behaviour of a loser.”

Roland approached a whiteboard and drew a simplified version of the circles from their last session.



"You are simply you. You behave in some way. Your behaviour is influenced by a number of things. Your experiences. Your knowledge. Your opinions, and beliefs. And also by what you consider yourself to be. Do you have any jocks in your class?" Roland took a sudden turn in the conversation.

"Yes. Koudela."

"What is this Koudela like?"

"Buff. Plays football."

"What else can you tell me about him?"

"He doesn't give a fuck. He offends everybody, and doesn't care about what the teachers say at all."

"Does he have a lot of girls?"

"Yes," David sighed.

"Do you think he has a lot of confidence?"

"I guess."

"Would you like to be like him?"

"Don't know. He acts tough, but he's a wanker."

"He acts tough. He has the image of a tough guy."

"More of a fop."

"So he has the image of a fop. But what does he believe about himself?"

"That he is the master of the world."

"And here we go. Neither you, nor me have any idea what Koudela believes about himself. The chances are, he has as many issues as you do. But hypothetically... let's say he thinks about himself as the master of the world. And he acts like it. He doesn't just have an outward image. He also has an image of himself inside of himself."

"As if pretending to be something to himself?"

“Basically. He believes he is something and it’s influencing his behaviour. Let’s try another example. Do you have a really nice person in your class?”

Kristýna, David thought, but out loud he only said: “Yeah, we do.”

“So this somebody believes that they are kind. When it comes to helping somebody, they help. Because they believe somebody should help. And since they are kind, they have to help, right? It is not only about our image in front of others... but mainly about the image, or identity, we hold for ourselves.”

David’s mind remained stuck on Koudela. He remembered how he described him the last time they smoked together before class: *Koudela was an arrogant football player with curly hair and an annoying habit of stretching his words out. He was regularly handing out insults without batting an eye. He was a fop, and had a reputation to maintain.*

Image.

What was Koudela like in reality?

“As a human, you have an image you maintain in front of others – and which you maintain in front of yourself. Actually, you have several of those and are probably unaware of many of them. One of them is the ‘loser’. You believe that you are a loser... and you act accordingly.”

Roland added another circle to the drawing.

“Something happened to you, that’s the ‘event’, and it led to the creation of a negative belief. You started to believe that you really are a loser. You created an inner image of yourself as a loser and you started to behave like one, even though you try and pretend otherwise to the world around you,” Roland explained.

"That's bollocks," David retorted. *I'm not a loser*, he thought, not knowing whether he actually believed it or not. He just wanted Roland to stop constantly repeating it.

"Maybe," Roland said and went silent.

They both looked at each other for a while, and David felt his chest squeezing around his heart in anxiety. He could feel that he was lying to himself and was just unwilling to admit it. The stare Roland was giving him made him feel like he could see right through him. He didn't like it, didn't like feeling so vulnerable in front of someone he barely knew. What puzzled him even more, was the fact that Roland really didn't seem to be judging him. His look was one of a person who just wanted to help. And hear the truth. David wanted to know the truth as well.

"Why do you think I'm a loser?" David asked.

"I don't think you are a loser. I think you believe you are one."

"Why do you think I believe that?"

"Because that's what you are telling me."

"I don't think I'm a loser."

"So what do you think? What is your image?"

"I don't have one. But Koudela, he pretends to be cool."

"And you don't pretend that you're cool?"

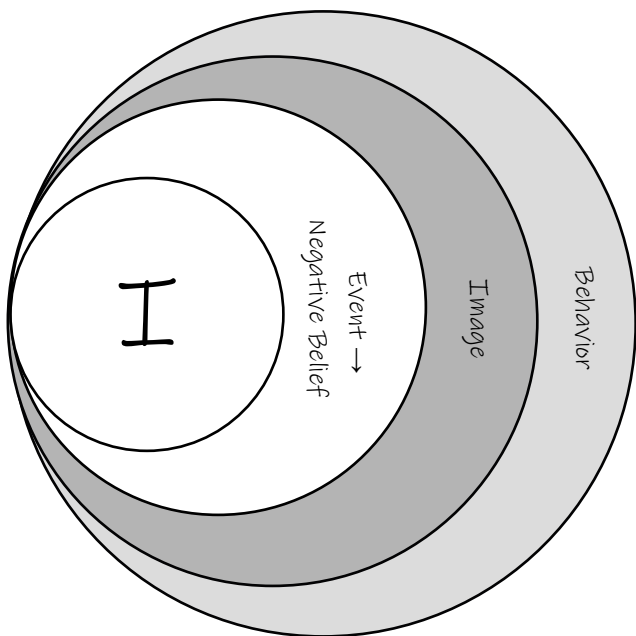
"Not like him."

"So what do you pretend to be?"

"I don't pretend to be anything. I am who I am."

"And who are you?"

David fell silent, a clump of disgust forming in his belly. It went up through his chest and throat and settled on his tongue. It sat there quietly for a time, until he couldn't take it anymore and had to get it out, to get the rotten taste out



of his mouth. "I'm a loser," he whispered. His hands were shaking again.

Roland nodded, not in agreement, just acknowledgement. "But why would I believe something like that?"

Roland shrugged. "I don't know. I have a friend. A masochist. She always chooses partners who hurt her. And not only in bed. They torture her psychologically. Put plainly, she always ends up with an asshole. Why? Her mother committed suicide. She hung herself. My friend blames herself for it. Partly because her whole family blames her for it too." He paused for a moment. "I don't know what has happened in your past. But I think that there is something that's influencing you strongly."

"Sure," David retorted. He felt sick. "That's no mystery."

"Tell me," Roland invited him.

"I don't have a dad," David spat.

"What happened?"

"He left."

"Ah. How old were you?"

"Two."

"So you don't even remember him?"

"No. This is all I have left of him," he raised his left wrist. The old wristwatch he always carried gleamed sadly.

"Why did he leave?"

"I would like to know that too!" David said, anger quickly seeping into his tone.

Roland gestured for him to continue, and so David did, his voice raising in volume until he was almost shouting, breathing heavily, spitting the sentences out like poison.

"All right... My father was a gypsy. He slept with my mum when she was in high school and they had me. So they got

married, to piss off my mum's parents. But they barely got by. Mum's parents refused to support us and my dad's side didn't have much to give to us. My dad was on support as well, and only a few months after I'd been born, my mom got pregnant again. Then, my father just left one day."

"So?"

David took a deep breath. His blood was boiling, yet at the same time, he felt like he let out most of his anger, and fatigue and weariness were starting to take over instead.

"So nothing," he said, not knowing what Roland was asking.

Roland took some time before he reacted.

"What did your mother do?"

"What would she do? She raised us on her own. She worked in Albert and then in Lidl. She still does."

"Do you miss him?"

"How could I miss him? I've never really met him."

"How about your grandparents? Do they know anything about him?"

"Probably. But we stopped seeing our grandmother. Mum said that she was constantly pulling money out of us, so after my father left, we completely cut connections with them. I don't even know them, I haven't seen them since I was a little kid."

"And what about your mum? Does she know something about him?"

"I don't know. She won't talk about him."

Roland nodded.

"If you were to meet your father, what would you like to tell him?"

"Don't know. I have nothing to tell him."

Roland nodded again. He remained silent for a long time, but David didn't want to listen to anything anyway. All he wanted was to go home, fall into his bed and close his eyes, or even better, play a computer game and forget about everything.

"Would you like to meet your father?" Roland asked.

"Don't know," David said, and added after a while: "I guess."

"Would you like to meet him right now?"

"What do you mean?"

Instead of answering, Roland stood up and approached a nearby closet. He took out two circular little carpets, one black, one red. He passed them to David.

"I would like to try something out," he said. "It's based on systemic coaching. Without further explanation... Stand up, please."

David obeyed, feeling confused and tired, but still mindful of his promise.

"Now choose. One of the carpets is going to represent you. The other one will represent your father. Pick. And don't overthink it too much. If you want, close your eyes. Take a deep breath, let it out. Follow your feelings."

David followed the instructions. He took a deep breath. His whole body felt tense, insides squeezed tight; he didn't understand, but he wanted to know what would happen next, and he felt gripped by a strong, unexplainable fear. All three of those were things he was starting to get used to during his sessions with Roland. Only this time the fear was even stronger than usual.

"This will be me," he lifted the black carpet.

"Excellent. Open your eyes. See the little mark on the carpet?" David gazed at the small arrow at the top of the circle.

“This signifies where the person is looking. Now put your carpet on the ground, and then place a carpet representing your father down as well. And again... don’t think about it much. Follow your instinct. Follow what you feel.”

“All right, all right,” David said. It all seemed absurd, like some motherfucking voodoo.

He placed his carpet on the ground and threw his father’s carpet in front of him.

“Not like this,” Roland warned him. “Take the carpet representing your father and place it where you feel it should be.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t try to understand it by logic. Just follow your instinct.”

David took his father’s carpet again. Just like David’s, it had a little arrow on it. What now? He wanted to place it in front of him, but at the last moment, he changed his mind. He took a step forward. Then a couple more. He placed the carpet on the ground, but it still felt off, so he moved the carpet further away. The little arrow caught his eye then, and he turned the carpet so that it was pointing away from his own.

“Like that?” Roland asked.

“I guess so,” David said, but in reality, he was sure: *yes, exactly like this.*

“Now step on your carpet and close your eyes. Don’t rush. Just observe how you feel, and if your body wants to do something, follow it.”

David suddenly felt terribly anxious. It was as if he was holding the weight of the whole world; a world from nuts and bolts and broken pieces of Lego which somebody put into a sack and placed on his shoulders, and David had to hold it, because if he let go, the whole mish-mash master-

piece would shatter into pieces. He slouched unconsciously under the imaginary weight, and wished to stuff his hands into his pockets.

"Is there something you would like to do?" Roland asked.

As David heard him, he put his hands into pockets.

"Is that all?" Roland asked.

"No," David whispered, surprised at how hard it was for him to speak up.

"So what would you like to do?"

"To sit down."

"Then sit down."

David sat on his little carpet, bent his knees and hugged them. He kept his eyes closed, breathing intermittently, fast and shallow, as though he was gripped by panic. But why would he be panicking?

"How do you feel?" Roland asked.

"Shitty," David whispered.

"Is there something more?"

David tried to speak up, but his voice failed. He tried again: "I feel alone... Completely alone.."

Roland took his time. "Try to open your eyes and look at your father."

David listened and looked at the other carpet.

"How do you feel?"

Such a simple question, and yet there's no simple answer. I can feel my stomach sinking and my neck is getting pinched by invisible pliers and every word I utter hurts. And over there is my dad, big and strong, his back turned towards me, just like when he left, which is weird, I haven't actually seen it happen. This exactly what it would be like though, doesn't matter if I've seen it or, helpless, final

and so bloody painful as though somebody was hammering nails into my body, and cutting me all over, and you're leaving me alone here, dad, you're leaving me alone with my mum and little sister and with the unbearable heaviness of life. How am I supposed to carry it all on my own?

"Abandoned," he finally replied. His hands were shaking again.

"How does your father look now, when you look at him? What does his body look like? I am talking about your image of him, of course."

"His back is turned to me. He has a large back, broad shoulders. He's not looking at me."

"Would you like him to look at you?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to get up and turn his carpet towards you?"

"Maybe," David mumbled.

"Let's do it."

David tried to get up.

"I can't," he whispered.

The whole world was lying on his shoulders, that awkward world made out of nuts and bolts and Lego bricks, and it weighed five tons or more and it was his, and only his, to carry.

"Try it," Roland nudged him.

David stood up. It felt as if somebody was pushing his shoulders down, but he clenched his teeth. Even as he stood, he still felt the weight bearing down on him. He approached his father's carpet. As he put his hand on it, it felt like playing tug-of-war to get it to move. With effort, he turned it towards himself as much as he could. Only when he stepped back did he realize that his father's carpet was

still not pointing at him, but to the side. Yet, it was better than a moment ago.

“Stand back in your original place,” Roland instructed. He was speaking softly, but firmly.

David wanted to sit back down at first, but then he changed his mind. He wasn’t a child anymore, hiding behind his mother’s skirt. He stood up in front of his father and straightened his back as much as he could. To show him that he doesn’t need him. To show him that he’s strong, that he can get by without him. And then, before he could stop it, there was a flash of red hot pain in his heart, and tears started to come out of his eyes. He started wiping them off aggressively.

“David...” Roland said. “There is nothing wrong with tears. On the contrary. If you want to cry, then cry.”

He didn’t want to cry. Yet it happened anyway. And all the tears came out running like waterfalls. David bent over and a desperate wail left his mouth. It sounded more like a wounded animal than a human being. And then he screamed. He screamed and screamed and screamed, consumed by unexplainable rage. His hands clenched into tight fists and he aimlessly swung at the empty air. He really wanted to punch something.

“How do you feel?” Roland’s voice sounded distorted and far away.

“I want to smash something,” David spat, though his anger wasn’t directed at the other man.

He felt Roland moving through the room, but his eyes were closed shut so he had no idea what was happening. Then Roland was back, pushing something soft and firm into David’s hand.

"Can I touch you?" Roland asked.

"No!"

"Then at least open your eyes and follow me."

David listened. His view was blurry with tears. He realized that he was holding a sort of baton made out of foam and wrapped with tape. It was long enough to grasp with both hands.

Roland led him to the closest wall. "Hit it," he said.

David didn't need more prompting. He hit the wall with foam pad thing as if he would want to break through the mortar, and again, and again, and again, he smashing to all sides with every grain of anger grinding inside of him, and when he hit so hard the foam flew away from his hands, he jumped on a wall with his body, hitting it with fits, until Roland pressed the foam back to his hands. And David kept hitting and hitting and hitting. And he didn't care anymore if he was crying, he didn't care if he screamed. He was rolling in a hurricane of pain threatening to burn him into coffee. In one moment, he collapsed to the ground. But he kept hitting, around himself, blindly, even though not with such a strength anymore. And then rage returned in a second wave, shorter, but as brutal as the first one, and he hit and smashed and kicked with legs in the air. And then, he remained lying down. He jerked a few times more.

It took him a while until he realized Roland was sitting next to him. As he raised his eyes, Roland looked straight into them. Roland's eyes were crystal clear, maybe just with a hint of worries.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Don't know," David whispered, adding after a while: "Empty. I feel so terribly empty."

“That’s good,” Roland said. “Sometimes people are full of emotions. The worst we can do is to lock them inside. Let it out. Let it all out. Cry, if you feel like it. That’s all right. That’s how it’s supposed to be.”

After a while he placed his hand on David’s shoulder. “You are not alone,” he said.

And David started to cry again, barking heavy sobs which were turning inside of him in saliva and sulfur burning through the ground of David’s soul as an acid.

“What now?” he asked, not knowing how much time had passed. In the emptiness in the middle of his heart, remained nothing; nor grief, nor sadness, nor shame, nothing.

“I would like to show you something,” Roland said, stood up, approached the whiteboard and tapped on the connected circles.

“Whatever your image is… whatever belief is causing it… whatever behavior you manifest through it… it’s not you. You are you and you have full power to act as you choose. I would like to introduce to you a tool that can give you a full power over your life. It’s called a victim/accountability chart.”

Roland looked at his watch.

“Our session will be over soon. If you want to, you can go home. But if you have extra time - we can spend another hour together.”

David nodded. In the emptiness, there were no answers. Maybe he didn’t long for them, but he *needed them*! He needed them if *something was supposed to ever change*.

Yes, he wanted to stay here.

Session 4.

Victim/Accountable Chart

“Try to imagine yourself walking across the room, and suddenly you stub your toe on the table. What will be the first thing you do?

You will probably scream, and swear at the table. That is absolutely normal – it’s a taught reaction. So-called **automatic behaviour**, a natural reaction that we barely even realize. It’s the same thing when we grimace or roll our eyes at hearing something we dislike. Or when we get angry when our parents comment on our behaviour.”

Roland picked up the marker and once again set out to draw on the board.

Automatic behavior

“That’s normal: we behave as we are taught to behave.
But we are not our behaviour, we exhibit behaviour.
We simply are.
Period.

To be honest, from an evolutionary perspective, automatic behaviour is an advantage. It's helped us survive. If our body automatically drops to the ground to blend with our surroundings whenever we hear the leaves rustle, we lower our chances of getting eaten alive by a hunting sabre-toothed tiger.

Automatic behaviour doesn't allow us to learn new things, but it allows us to reach mastery of the things we already know. If we didn't have the ability to do things automatically, we would constantly be learning everything from the ground up.

But as it is with almost anything – what allowed us to survive out in the wild, can cause us troubles in society. The human-animal is stuck in the cultural trap of human society, forced to suppress its natural urges (for example defecating anytime and anywhere it needs, never mind that it might be standing in the middle of the street) and learn cultural norms.

We are all trapped in our automatic behaviour. Sometimes it makes our lives easier. Sometimes it does the opposite.

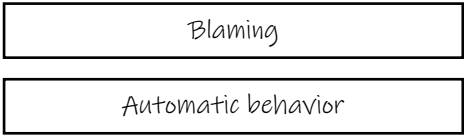
I know very well at what point my automatic behaviour was making my life more difficult. When I was in elementary school. Younger than you are now, David. I have to admit that I never got along with my parents, but I was depending on them. I needed their financial support, and I couldn't just leave. So I found my own form of rebelling. I started dyeing my hair – I know, such a trifle, but I lived in a village, and it was a different time. If I had done anything bigger, I'd get a few hits with a belt. Neither of them was very fond of me colouring my hair, but they left me alone for the most part.

From time to time, they commented on it and it would always make me very angry right away.

And you know what's funny? To a degree, I'm still like that, even though I haven't been depending on them for a long time. And it doesn't have to be coming just from my parents. Recently, a friend asked me why I wear my hair the way I do – and I immediately got defensive and aggressive. I only realized it afterwards.

But back to my story. The truth is that I was blaming my parents for a number of things.”

Roland added another rectangle above the first one.



Blaming

Automatic behavior

“I blamed them for the fact that I was not popular in class. That I didn't have any friends. And I was trying to convince myself that if I had designer clothes and nice new glasses, I would fit in better. My classmates were laughing at me very often because of my clothes and glasses.

Generalisation and distortion, by the way. It cannot be said that I didn't have any friends, and I would hardly get more with nicer glasses or trousers.”

A third rectangle appeared on the board.

Excuses

Blaming

Automatic behavior

“I blamed my father and mother for not teaching me how to fight because they would always punish me when I would get into fights as a kid. They forbid such behaviour. And I was trying to convince myself that nobody would pick on me if I were stronger.

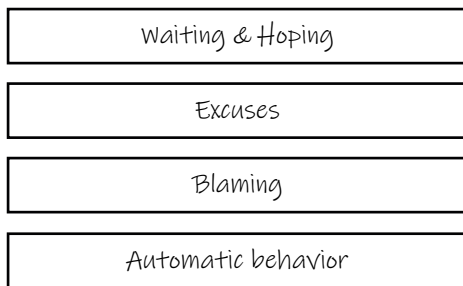
I blamed my parents for being bullied by my classmates, telling myself that this would not be happening to me if my parents had not forced me to be such a goody-two-shoes. But no, those damn parents raised me to be nice and polite.

And this whole time, I was doing nothing with myself. I was simply waiting and hoping that something would miraculously change and that people would start liking me, and I would make some friends.”

Another rectangle was added:

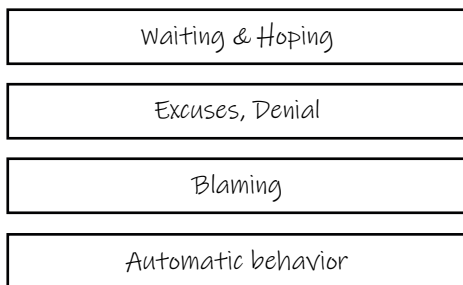
“I was a victim of circumstances and there was nothing in the whole world I could do about it. If only I had money. If only I had run away from my parents. If only we lived in a different city. If, if, if. But no real change.

At times, I would deny that anything wrong was happening. I would convince myself that I was doing rather well.

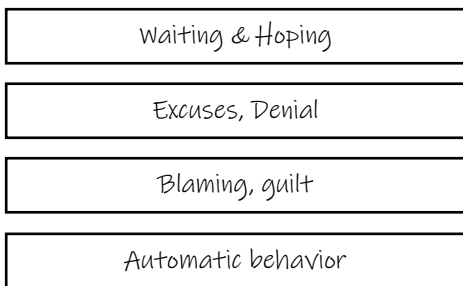


That my situation is an ideal one, an ideal life. I had books and that was enough. Who would want to hang out with friends when you can spend your Friday afternoon at the library, right?."

One of the boxes got an update:

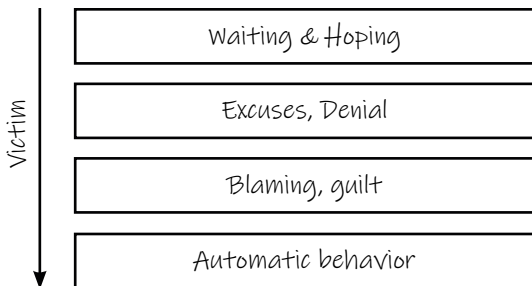


“And of course, from time to time, I would blame myself. Telling myself that I was boring, or ugly because of the way I look. That I’m a completely miserable human being who doesn’t deserve anything nice and is worthless. Just a waste of space.”



“No action. I was my own scapegoat, angry at the rope tied around my neck, but I never did anything to try and free myself of it. I acted like a victim.”

Roland drew a big down-pointing arrow next to the boxes.



“But you were a victim,” David mused. Roland’s story was both pathetic and pitiful, but it awakened a deep sense of sympathy in him. “It wasn’t your fault that your parents didn’t give you money.” Oh, how well he knew that feeling. To be the poorest. To have the worst clothes of them all. To be a laughing stock for the whole class because his mum couldn’t afford anything better for him. “Or proper clothes. Or something.”

“Yeah, well, that’s not the point. Of course, I was a victim of the circumstances. We can say none of it was my fault. But that won’t change my part in it. And as long as I kept acting like a victim, I couldn’t do anything, only live in misery.

Here comes the funny part.

The whole time, I had the power to change my life in my hands. But I **deleted** it out of my reality.

A, I had friends, even though I have to admit I wasn’t winning any popularity contests. But I have never put any effort into meeting others outside of the class. I was barely ever spending time even with my friends from extracurriculars.

B, I was the one who picked all of my glasses, so the point about getting nicer ones falls flat. And I didn’t want to pick my own clothes, nor get any as a gift, so my mom simply bought what she thought best and that’s what I wore.

Finally, I used to do karate. But they bullied me there, so I told my parents that I wanted to do something else. I kept coming up with other reasons for why I wanted to quit. I told myself that it was boring there anyway, that they didn’t teach me anything, and that it would be better if I took up a more fun hobby. Or no hobby at all, because I didn’t really want to go anywhere anyway.

The truth is, I was just cowardly. That's why I didn't fight. It was better to get humiliated than to get into a fight.

I got stuck in this situation more or less until graduation. I made some friends in high school but I can say with certainty that half of the class didn't like me much. And pretty much all of the other classes thought I was an ass.

I didn't have a girlfriend back then. It was unthinkable for me to kiss, or even just hug, a girl. I was sticking to automatic behaviour that I was taught by living with two older sisters, by going to Scouts, throughout all my childhood years: girls have to be mocked. Sometimes I should hurt them a little bit to show them who's stronger. It's not like I wanted to hurt them, I simply wanted to be admired by them because of my strength. To ask a girl out on a date? Well, I don't know, what if she rejects me? **Excuses.**

I wanted to... but I didn't have the courage to do it. I thought – I believed – that I was an ugly loser. I will probably never be able to count all of the events that made me believe that I was a loser, a coward and a wretch – all of my negative beliefs. There were a lot of them and I caused most of them myself.

Whenever I fancied a girl, I would simply wait and hope she would notice me. When we went to a party as a group, I would be secretly hoping and praying that maybe, something would happen. **Waiting and hoping.** I really wanted to date this one girl from our class. I took her and a few friends to a pub, hoping something would happen, and that same night, one of my friends got together with her. And again, I reacted automatically: I got filled with anger, I went out to run and then I kicked the hell out of some bins to get the anger out. I never told my friend anything. I preferred to play

the martyr. A tragic hero, misunderstood by society, ugly and lonesome. That was my image. I was a weird cross-breed of Werther and Quasimodo.

Then, I left for university. It was a big thing in my head. I believed that I would finally get out of the influence of my parents. I found myself a job and a flat and everything seemed great.

Change of environment is very important for any change in behaviour and way of life to happen. But it wasn't the most important thing that happened. I also finally accepted the reality. I told myself: 'Hey, Roland, you fucked up in elementary and high school. You had almost no friends, everybody thought you were an ass, a bookworm, a grey mouse.' That was the important part."

A new box went on the board:

Acknowledging reality

"What was even more important, I told myself that I was the only one to blame for my problems. I stopped blaming my parents because it wasn't as though they were with me in school and could see what was happening there. I also stopped blaming my sisters because, at that time, they were doing everything they could to help me. I knew I was the cause of my situation. Because I didn't talk to people. Because I would spend all my time reading books or watching TV. Because I was a nerd. Because I didn't do

interesting things. So I took ownership of my reality. Over the reality I created for myself.”

Accepting ownership

Acknowledging reality

“And I decided to change my reality, and I planned how I was going to do it.”

Making plans

Accepting ownership

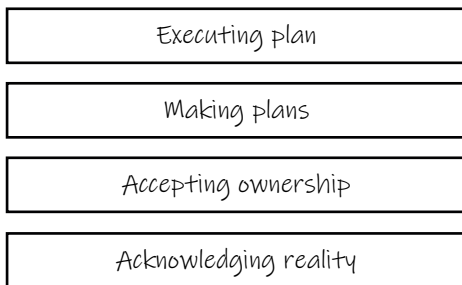
Acknowledging reality

“I decided that during lectures, I would speak to the people sitting next to me. Even with random people I didn’t know, despite my shyness. I decided to act cool – whatever that meant. To be funny and interesting.

Let me tell you, pretending that you are something you’re not is not the best strategy, but from a short-term perspective, it can be effective. That’s a topic for another time though.

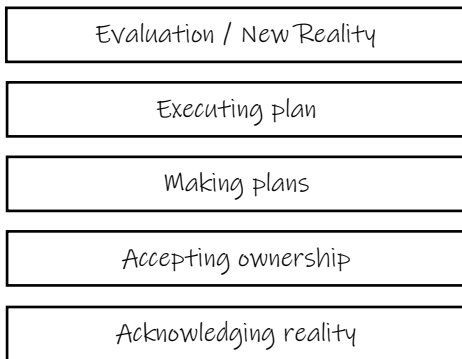
I also decided to do something that would make me more interesting – I dyed my hair purple. Sure, I had dyed my hair before, but this colour was really flashy. In the past, I would often try to be invisible. This time, I was trying to be seen.

And then, it was time to see the plans through...” he paused to add another box:

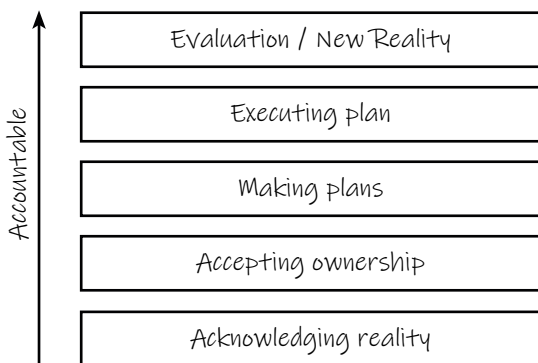


“... and evaluate what they brought to me.”

And then Roland drew a final box:



“I stopped being the victim of my reality, and started to be accountable for it.”

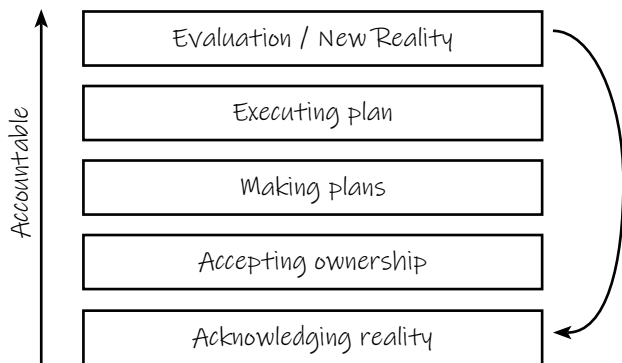


“When you follow this tool, you are doing one plan after another. You always start with just one and then, you evaluate what it brought you. Any action – including the action you won’t take – brings you a new reality that needs to be acknowledged.”

He added a new arrow.

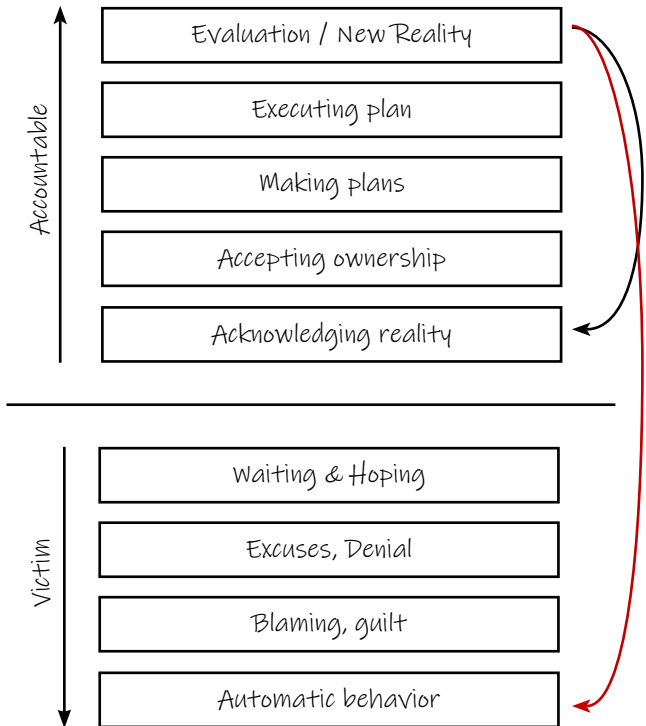
“My first plan was to dye my hair – I did that during the summer before university. It brought me a lot of attention, in my village, but mainly at university as well. Which was what I wanted.

I followed the second plan when I started going to classes: I would talk to other people in the corridors or in class.



Not all my actions brought results immediately. Or more specifically, I didn't see the results straight away. Therefore, it was very easy to fall back into my automatic behaviour. To the position of a victim. I got irritable again, I was blaming my parents for everything again. I was waiting and hoping again."

This time, he connected the whole chart into a unified whole:



“I had to acknowledge the reality again and accept my ownership over it. I had to start behaving differently than what I was used to, again. And I had to create a completely new image for myself. I wasn’t a tragic hero anymore. This time, I was a joker. A jester.

My hair truly got the attention I was hoping for in uni. Even more than expected actually – the sun faded the dye out so much it turned pink. It was a good conversation starter. It helped me talk with people more easily, and suddenly, people would approach me as well, and I made many new friends.

Not all the changes happened quickly, mind you. I had to change gradually, over the course of several months. After two years, I found out that I was different from how I used to be. I had changed my beliefs and started living a much happier life.

I want to give you this tool because it enables you to take accountability for your life. There will always be things you can’t change, at least not at a given moment. But you can have control over yourself. Over your behaviour.

It’s natural to fall into automatic behaviour from time to time, you will slip and have a victim’s pity party. But it’s important to realize that acting as a victim won’t bring you anything but the familiar comfort of misery. It’s comfortable to believe everything is other people’s fault, and that you are innocent and powerless to change things. And taking responsibility for your life, and accountability for the reality you are in, is not comfortable at all. But it gives you the chance to create a life you would actually like to live.”

Still session 4 / Reality

David was learning quickly. He always did.

He was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, pondering what Roland had told him.

"When do you play the victim?" Roland asked him. They sat in armchairs in front of each other and David was drinking his third coffee.

"I don't play a victim," David retorted.

"So deletion," Roland nodded.

"You think you see right through me, right?!" David snapped.

Roland didn't react, he just watched David intently. Then, he slowly looked at the chart and back. "Where are you now?" he asked.

David knew where he was – in a bloody office of some bloody know-it-all, whose psychological models knew the right answer to everything. But he knew nothing about him! Nothing! It was the same as always!

As always...

He was taken aback by the thought and looked at the chart again.

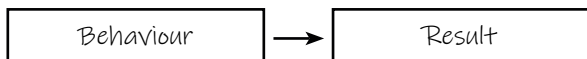
I'm behaving as always.

"Automatic behaviour," David said, not really eager to admit it.

Roland shrugged. "Maybe. Personally, I believe so, but I have no way of knowing for sure. David, I am offering the tool to you. I'm not forcing you to use it. I'm not saying it is

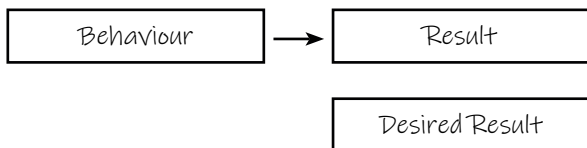
the only possible way of seeing the world. I am only saying that it helps me when I follow it, and I know a number of other people who have had the same experience with it. It is an effective tool for initiating change. It is a tool that supports a change of behaviour. It allows you to work on the change effectively.

Look, when talking about the real world, there is always some sort of behaviour that causes a certain result,” Roland said, stood up, and approached the board again, drawing yet another set of boxes:

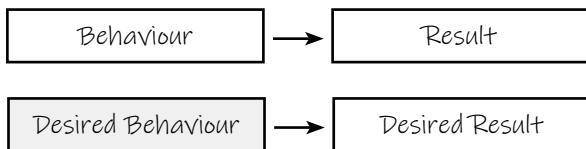


“If we know you are not happy with the result,” he double-tapped the second box, “we set up a **desired result.**”

He drew a third box under the second one.



“And then, we think about how to behave in order to reach the desired result,” he finished drawing a fourth box and wrote “Desired behaviour” inside.



“I work with my clients in this way. We analyze how they behave and what result it brings them. After that, we set up the desired result, and based on it we identify the desired behaviour to reach it. But it never works unless they acknowledge and accept the perspective of the Victim/ Accountable chart – or any other chart with a similar effect, doesn’t really matter. The key point is to become accountable for their life, and accept that they have the capacity to change it. If they endlessly blame external factors, they always end up as victims of circumstances. When I coach them, I can work with them on it, but I am in their lives only for a short time.

Another thing I work on with people are their **negative beliefs**. Things that they believe, but that are only in their heads. They have the full power to change that. To make it easier, I introduce the mechanisms of **generalization, deletion, and distortion**.

In the end, it’s not up to me if something will change in your life or not. It’s up to you. I cannot change you –and I actually don’t want that – and I cannot change your reality. But I can support you if you decide that you want to change your reality.”

David wanted to change his reality. He wanted it very much.

The thought stuck with him for the rest of the day. For the whole week even.

I am responsible for my reality. I can change it anytime. Not others, me.

Everything clicked together when Patrick scored an F in a Math.

“Fucking bitch,” Patrick cursed when the lesson ended, “it wasn’t fair at all.”

“What wasn’t fair?” David wondered.

It was true, as usual, Mrs Kovářová pulled out the attendance sheet, looked around the class and asked: “So, who shall we test today? It’s the fifteenth of May, fifteen minus five is ten, year 2018, that means plus eleven, all together it is twenty one. Who’s number 21? Ah, Škorpík. Come on, Patrick, up in front of the board please.”

“Bollocks, random,” Patrick disagreed. “She knows my number. She has it in for me, I tell you.”

“She has it in for everybody,” David leaned back in his chair, watching Patrick as he stood by his desk, gesticulating rapidly with his hands, giving the impression of an agitated drummer.

“Not Everybody. She leaves Kristýna alone. She loves that nerd so much.”

“She picked her last time.”

“Because she knew that she would be prepared for it,” Patrick threw his arms up, as if it were obvious.

“How could she have known??”

“Kristýna is always prepared for class.”

“But Kovářová has it in for you.”

“Yes. Last time she told me that she’d keep an eye out for me.”

“Meaning...?” David leaned forward.

“Meaning she would pick me for the testing.”

“So that means you knew it was gonna happen,” David said, shaking his head with a smirk on his lips.

“It was deadly obvious to me.”

“Yet you didn’t get ready for it.”

“I was hoping it wouldn’t happen.”

David started to laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. At least I know how to explain the next F I get from her. It’s not like I’m dumb. She just has it in for me.”

Session 5:

Accepting reality

Coming to his next session, David was full of resolve. In the past week, he realized that there was one thing that hadn't been brought up in his sessions with Roland. And once the thought came he couldn't shake it off, until he found himself sitting in one of the cosy armchairs, the question burning at the top of his tongue.

He clenched his fists as doubt overtook him. *What is going to happen now? How is he going to react when I ask?* However what was plaguing his mind wasn't the other man's reaction upon being asked the question, but rather his reaction to the conversation that was sure to follow it. He was going to judge David for sure.

"Why haven't you asked me about what I've done to end up here?" he finally blurted.

Roland raised his eyebrows. "Would you like to talk about it?"

"That's not an answer," David retorted.

"No, it is not. I wonder how to put it so that you will understand what I mean. I've never asked because it wasn't important to me."

"Of course. You've already made up your mind about me. Just like everybody," David leaned back in his chair angrily, arms folded over his chest. Suddenly, he felt disgusted by

everything. But the following answer made him stare at the other man in disbelief:

“Quite the contrary. I lack data to form an opinion.”

“But you have records from the trial,” David accused. “Or the police report.”

Roland scratched behind his ear. “Yes, I should have it here somewhere. I’ve probably seen the file at some point. But there are so many papers going through my hands every day and well... I simply don’t remember what was in the report. I think you were on trial for some shoplifting, right? But whatever it was, it doesn’t mean much to me. It’s just something that you’ve done. But you are not your behaviour. That’s what is really important to me. Who you are. Not what you have done.”

David just stared at him for a moment. He felt enormous relief and... gratitude. He had thought that Roland was only pretending to be nice to him, that secretly he thought David was a scoundrel. But no, it just wasn’t important to him. *All this time, all he cared about was me, not my actions.* There was hope in that thought.

“So, David. Would you like to tell me about what you’ve done?” Roland asked.

“No,” David exhaled but realised immediately that that wasn’t really true. “Yes,” but a lump formed immediately in his throat at the idea. “Maybe.”

“So what is it going to be?” Roland chuckled at him good-naturedly.

David breathed in deeply and decided to start from a different angle. “Something’s been bugging me. I keep thinking a lot about that Victim/Accountable chart of yours. And I can’t connect it to the situation.”

“All right. Let’s have a look at it then.”

So David began telling his story. Slowly at first, then faster, and faster, stumbling over his words, and mumbling, spitting them like they were sprinters in a race.

“I wonder where to begin. Probably at the dam. It was the weekend, and we decided to go to Veverí castle. We got slightly drunk. Okay, very drunk. We didn’t get far, we got stuck on the beach near the old hotels, and we stayed there, drinking until late at night. Patrick – one of my classmates – suggested we go skinny dipping. The girls didn’t want to but the guys started getting undressed. I didn’t join them and... they started mocking me, calling me a chicken and saying that I have no balls. I answered that whether I wanted to go to swim or not had nothing to do with my courage, and asked them what had they done that made them so brave.”

He slowed down a little bit. “I... well, you see, it pisses me off.” He sighed. “Koudela – another classmate – has been attacking me any moment he gets an opportunity ever since I joined the class. He loves to ridicule me. And, well, that time he’d succeeded again. He told us that he managed to get an eighteen-year-old girl to sleep with him when he was only fourteen. And then laughed at me because I’ve never had a girl. As the only one in the group,” he breathed out and muttered sullenly:

“I wanted to deny it, but couldn’t because it was true and I was sure that they would recognize that I was fibbing.

And at that moment, Dominika got involved,” with that memory, anger returned and he started speaking faster again: “She said that she would sleep with me if I proved I had some balls. They started to provoke me, asking what I was willing to do to get some. I... I suggested that I could

jump off a cliff,” he threw his hands up, “but they said that was too weak. They said they needed something real. Like stealing the car from my mum and driving them around for a bit – but our car is shitty and I don’t know how to drive. Or beating up a homeless guy, but I would never do anything like that. So I came up with the idea that I could rob a store.

They immediately accused me of making that up and said that I would never dare do anything like that. But I did.”

He paused to collect his thoughts. Roland was nodding along, watching him carefully. He looked curious.

“I walk past one electronics store quite often,” David continued, “and I’ve seen them put the security code into the alarm system before closing at least a hundred times. So I only needed the keys to get in and... well, I already had them. A few days before that, I saw them drop out of the salesman’s pocket as he was getting in his car. I took them and planned on returning them but never got around to it. I had no idea if they hadn’t changed the locks already but since they had the code, I thought... Well, I just broke in the next day.

I unlocked the door, put the security code in and walked up to the cash register to spray ‘I was here. Fantomas.’ on it. I know, how original, but I didn’t have a better idea. I had my hood pulled over my head so that no one would recognize me, and, well, some elderly lady saw me from her window, found it suspicious, and called the police. And the police station is right on the corner of the street. They found me just as I was starting to tag the register – I really don’t get how they got there so bloody quick. They arrested me for breaking in with the intention to steal, and you know the rest.”

Throughout the whole retelling Roland listened attentively, nodding from time to time, but otherwise remaining silent. He stayed calm, while David kept fidgeting, hands shaking and eyes wandering around, avoiding eye contact. As David finished talking, Roland asked: "And where is the problem? Why can't you connect it with the Victim/Accountable chart?"

"Because it's all so unfair!" David yelled. "I didn't want to do anything bad. I didn't even want to break into the store! They just provoked me."

It really was how he felt, but as he said the words he felt like a kid, complaining that he couldn't have another piece of candy.

"Well, and after they caught you, what did you do?"

"I couldn't do anything," David sighed. "They had witnesses, they caught me red-handed and the seller recognized me, so they wrote it down as an attempted burglary."

"Did you tell them you didn't plan on stealing anything?"

"I did. They wouldn't listen."

"Your friends didn't confirm your story?"

"I don't have any friends. And no, they didn't."

"How come?"

"Because I didn't mention them at all."

"Ah. Why so?"

"Because... because I didn't want the cops to know about the bet. And Dominika didn't keep her end of the bargain anyway. She laughed in my face and told me that a 'real man' wouldn't get caught."

"That's shit," Roland nodded.

It was the first time David heard him use a swear word. It amused him. "Yes, that's really shit," he agreed, with a hectoliter of irony in his voice.

"But you do understand that you are the only one to blame, right?"

"How come?" he replied, voice indignant.

"Did somebody force you to go to that store?"

"No, but - "

"Did you know you were breaking the law?"

"Yes, but they provoked me!"

"I guess they did. But they didn't drag you into that store by force, did they?"

"That's not fair!"

Roland shrugged shoulders. "I don't know what is and isn't fair. In my worldview, it is not really important anyway. What's important are our actions. You might be accusing your friends of provoking you," he said, pointing at the word Blaming in the chart, "but will it bring anything to you? In the real world I mean, is it going to help you in any way?"

"It just pisses me off!"

"I get it. But is it useful? Is it going to change your situation somehow? You have been sentenced already, and your punishment is to visit me and to do some community service. You say that you have no friends, your relationship with your family seems to be quite tense, and you still didn't get laid. So what good is it to blame others?"

"Fine, it's pointless! Happy?" David yelled and jumped out of his chair. "I know it! But what am I to do with it? I'm pissed off anyway! I can't even look at Koudela without wanting to punch him. I refuse to talk with Dominika! And I'm left alone with everything! It's not fair! It's just not fair!"

Despite the dramatic outburst, Roland's expression didn't change. He smiled a little. "So what would be fair?" he asked.

"It would be fair if they'd help me with the community service shit."

"But they can't. Partly also because you haven't decided what form of community service you are going to do yet. So who is responsible for the situation?"

"I am!"

"So you get it."

"Yes, I get it!"

"But you don't want to accept it."

"No!"

"Because it hurts."

"Yes! So much!" David started pacing around the room. "I get it, all right!" There was a storm raging inside of him. "It's my fault. But my insides are boiling. I'm pissed."

"You feel anger."

"That's what I said."

"No, you said you were pissed, but there is a difference between being something and feeling something. Are you your anger, or do you feel angry? Do you see the difference?"

"Sometimes it feels as though I am the anger. When it gets a hold of me, it's everywhere and it feels like I can't breathe."

"And how often does it get a hold of you?"

"Often."

"What do you do when you feel anger?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"On where I am at the moment."

"So who makes you angry, for example?"

David halted his angry strides. He still felt the waves of anger inside of him, but it wasn't Roland he was pissed at, and if he was going to answer, he needed to stop.

"Our teacher, for example," he remembered Mrs Kovářová. "When she gives me a bad grade, or humiliates me."

"And what do you do in such situations?"

"Not much. I just sit at my desk."

"So you suppress the anger. When else do you get angry?"

"Well, my mom pisses me off a lot."

"And what do you do when she pisses you off?"

"I don't know. I snap back. Or go to my room."

"And what do you really want to do in those situations?"

"I want to yell at her."

"Hm... you don't do any sport, do you?"

"No," David admitted.

"How much physical activity do you get?"

"Don't know. I walk to school on foot."

"That's not enough. Look, this is tricky. Most people aren't used to working with their emotions. Especially in our society. When we get angry, we bottle it up inside of ourselves, because it's not socially acceptable to get furious. And as a result, it keeps smoldering within us, until we're on edge, and we overreact. There are several ways to work with that."

"Like?" David remained standing, but stepped closer. He wanted to know the answer, because he could still hear Tereza's words ringing inside his head:

'I really don't know what your issue is, but I want my caring and kind brother back, not this walking black hole that tears apart anything that comes its way. I'm starting to be afraid of you! I'm just waiting for the day when you start hitting mum.'

“First, you need to accept your feelings. When I was young, I used to be one big ball of anger. The smallest thing would infuriate me and I overreacted to things constantly. As a teenager, I was afraid that I had anger issues. I thought so based on my choleric father. Much later, I realized that I was wrong. I wasn’t aggressive, and I wasn’t angry. I was in pain. I took things that were happening around me personally, and I was creating pain for myself that I didn’t know how to work with. So I turned it into anger because it was easier to smash things than to cry.

The next time somebody makes you angry, the first thing you can do is stop and ask yourself: ‘What am I truly feeling?’ And don’t accept the first answer. If you spit out ‘anger’ immediately, think again. Ponder what is hidden beneath. Pain? Sadness? Fear?”

Roland paused. David stared at him without moving for a while. *How am I supposed to stop when it feels like a volcano is erupting inside of me? he thought. How am I supposed to stop when my hands are moving of their own will and sometimes, I don’t even know what words I’m saying?*

“I’m worried that I may not be able to stop myself,” he admitted. “When the anger comes over me, I can’t even think. I am so full of it that it boils over like molten lava.”

“Of course, because you are not used to it and your emotions are simply too strong. You’re like a full glass of wine, one small tilt and you spill over. Because you keep bottling your emotions up. From time to time, you get angry and a little bit spills out, but the glass is still not empty, and it’s easy to spill again. You need to understand one thing: emotions are like fluid and our body is a jar. Any emotions we

experience are inside of us, in the body. If we don't release them – pour them out – they will stay inside of us.

There are many ways of pouring them out. Tears are a good option. Shouting is also a possibility, but more tricky. I don't want to recommend screaming at others to you, not now. Maybe in the future. But there's also body movement. When we move and we get physically tired, we consume a lot of energy. Energy, which is also derived from our emotions. We basically evaporate the emotions out. Plus, we get rid of cortisol, a stress hormone, and release endorphins, oxytocin, adrenalin, and a lot of other hormones responsible for our good mood.

Try to go for a run. But not to Lužánky. Go somewhere on the edges of Brno, somewhere in nature, away from people, away from the rush all around, and run at least ten kilometres. And get it all out. That's your assignment for our next session. Deal?"

"Deal."

Reality

David ran. He ran and on the inside, he was screaming. Screaming that life isn't fair. That it was not David's fault. That the whole world sucks. That he just wanted it to end.

He was sprinting through the trees. At first he ran on the path, but he kept meeting one family with children after another. The sight of all the picturesque family happiness pissed him off.

He remembered how mum used to take him and Tereza on trips. She'd buy them raspberry lemonade and ice cream to help ease the unbearable summer heat. One time on one of those trips he'd asked: "When will dad be back?"

And his mother slapped him. "He won't come back!" she shouted. "How many times do I have to repeat that?"

He remembered the tears and the scared expression on her face when she realized what she had done. "I'm sorry," she whispered, "I'm so sorry. But don't ask about your father again. All right? Never ask about him again."

What a joke of a father. An asshole who left them when they were little. An asshole who left his family, just like David left the road, and was now running through the forest, away from all the happy faces, away from all the people who were watching him with judgment. Away from little kids who were laughing at him, or stepping out of his way with fear. Away from everything.

What an asshole!

He ran into a hill and he went up half climbing and half running, not wanting to stop even though the terrain was so steep. He couldn't stop, not now, even though his lungs were on fire, his throat dry and his legs made of lead. He couldn't stop, not now, not yet!

As he ran, he felt his anger shifting. He thought of his mum and his chest clenched in such pain he felt the need to scream. It came out as more of a crow cawing than any human sound; David didn't understand where he even found enough breath for such a scream.

Why was she constantly scolding him? Why was she constantly repeating that he was good for nothing and throwing his life away?

If she would at least compliment me a little. If she would appreciate everything I do for her! How I took care of Tereza. How I took care of the household! I've always been helping her! She never appreciated it!

He kept running. He no longer had the strength to sprint, but he would keep going, even if he had to crawl on all fours.

And what about Tereza? he wondered, but the thought had no power anymore. He felt his feet slowing down. All the thoughts started scrambling away. One came back to the surface though.

And Koudela...

He started thinking about everything Koudelal did to him. How he always targeted him during PE, pushing him, tripping his feet, and attacking him with the ball. How he wouldn't miss a single opportunity to make fun of him. How he was constantly provoking him.

David realized that he was running fast again – not as fast as before, but he wasn't slowing down anymore. His mind felt a little lighter.

And then, he found himself just running, and not thinking about anything any more, focusing only on his feet and breath.

Then, he found himself in Mariana Valley, standing near the dam, watching the world around with tired eyes, feeling ripped away from reality. His feet hurt, his throat burned. The sun was shining through the leaves and on the road below him. A little kid was there, riding a tricycle, followed by a laughing father.

David looked away, his heart full of needles.

He tried to run some more, but his body wouldn't listen.

Walking, he headed for the bus stop.

Session 6: Being

“What happened to your watch?” Roland asked when he noticed David checking the wall clock.

“I am just checking that I’m not late,” David said. “It’s been years since I was without a watch.”

Roland smiled. “If you don’t want to tell me…”

“Yeah, but I want to. I threw them away. When I was out for a run, I threw them among the trees. Then I changed my mind and tried looking for them, but I couldn’t find them.”

“How does it make you feel?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know. I don’t feel much of anything.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you remember how we talked about naming our emotions…?”

“Ah. All right. I… I think it’s apathy. Why should I keep them? They won’t bring my father back. And there is some sorrow as well. Because they cannot bring him back and because I don’t have them anymore. But then there is also relief. The watch was a constant reminder that my father is not with us anymore, that he left me, that I wasn’t good enough for him. Now it’s gone. And… I still know that he’s gone. But at least it’s not always right under my nose anymore.”

“Excellent.”

“Are you happy that I threw them away?”

“I don’t care about that much. I’m happy that you are aware of all the things you feel. That you are able to name them and admit you feel them. How did going for a run go, did it help?”

“Not really. On Tuesday, I got angry at Koudela again.”

“And when did you go for the run?”

“Saturday afternoon.”

“And why not again on Monday?”

“I… Well, it didn’t come to mind. I didn’t think it was important.”

“You behave as though you feel emotions only on Fridays, don’t you?” Roland sneered a little. “Emotions are present constantly. If you want to learn how to work with them, you should take your body into consideration and put physical activity into your daily routine. I don’t care what you do,” he stood up from the table, “dancing, swimming, running, riding a bike, playing football, jumping with a parachute, parkour, skateboarding… just do it!” he shouted.

The sudden emotional outburst astonished David. He’d never seen Roland get so passionate about something.

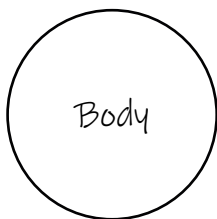
“All right…” David leaned back, stretching his hands out in a placating gesture to calm Roland down. “I didn’t realize it was bugging you so much.”

Roland crossed his arms on his chest. “You probably don’t understand why I’m yelling at you, eh? I’m trying to get you moving. We’re halfway through our sessions, and you still haven’t moved from the place you started. I can see that you understand most of the things I tell you. You are clever. But you still don’t dare take action. Yet it’s actions that are important. Action is the key.” He sighed and headed to the

whiteboard. “All right, let me give you another tool. It is simple, yet also damn complicated, so ready your ears. We’ll be talking about what determines our being.”

“Our being?” David was surprised. He had no clue what to imagine under that.

“Exactly. How we feel, how we function, our being at the moment. And let’s begin with the obvious. The first thing that influences our being in the world is our body.” He drew a circle.



“The way we talk. The way we speak. The way we stand. Our posture. Look at yourself: you’re slouched in the chair, bent back, crossed legs.”

Upon hearing that, David straightened up and put both his legs on the ground.

“See? You changed your position without me telling you what to do.”

“So what?”

“So everything. In 2004, Jessica Tracy and David Matsumoto observed blind athletes. They found out that upon winning or losing, their body language was the same as that of the athletes without impaired vision. They couldn’t have lear-

ned it by observing others. It was inside of them. When they won," Roland raised his hands and puffed up his chest, "they grew larger. When they lost," now he slumped his shoulders and curled in on himself, "they folded into themselves. There's research, done by psychologist Amy Cuddy, that suggests that our body influences our mind. If you take a certain position and stay long enough in it, the mind will follow. If you put a smile on your face, your mood can get better. If you straighten up, you can get more confident.

Your body reacts according to how you feel. If you don't focus on it, you don't have it under control. You're a victim. Yet, you have the freedom of choice. You can make a decision, that you want to feel better, even though you feel shitty. You can observe your body and revise its posture. You create your mood – not the world around you.

And here comes the interesting thing – when I pointed out your posture, you corrected it yourself. You sat up straight, you leveled your legs. You know how your body should be, even though you pretend not to. You just need to focus on it."

David frowned. "If only things were so simple, just straighten up and smile and everything will get better."

"Not everything. Just you. And it is that simple. It's just not easy. You have to focus on it. Until you automate it. The body has a memory. It has learned movement patterns. How you're used to walking. How you're used to standing. What do you think writing is? You know how every letter looks, but you need to teach your hand to move accordingly. Or playing the guitar, very much the same."

David stared at him defiantly. "So what?" he asked.

"What 'what'?" Roland repeated.

“What are you trying to tell me?”

“I am trying to tell you that you should pay close attention to your body. To the way you sit. The way you lie down. The way you stand. The body sends millions of signals both in and out, but to make it simpler: the bigger the stance, the bigger the confidence and strength. Read something about body language to learn more. If you catch yourself slouching, crossing your arms, legs, or anything... It's an opportunity to pay attention to your inner world, your emotions, your feelings, and it's also an opportunity to change your stance. To spread out. To take your place in the world.”

“Sounds a bit like manspreading,” David retorted.

“What?”

“Manspreading. The girls are always complaining about it. That men are spreading everywhere. At their desk. On the bus. When they sit, they spread their legs wide open. But girls, if they spread their legs, they are...”

“Hm... you are right. Look, I'm not telling you to oppress others by spreading yourself. Yet, in fact... manspreading is an example of what I just told you. The dominant male usurps his position at the top. He shows strength and confidence. It's not always nice, yet it is a social game, and it works.”

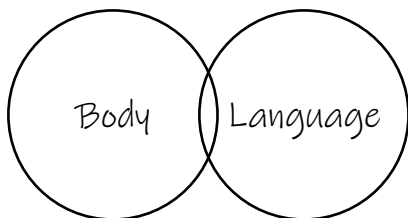
“But that's so fake,” David frowned, and sank into the chair again, regardless of what it would do with his body posture.

“Fake it till you make it. Teach your body how you want it to behave. Just like playing the guitar. Play with it. Find a position that is natural for you. Switch as many poses as you want, until you find the one that will feel more or less good. By the way, I think that all of them will feel weird at

first. But the more often you try them, the better they will feel. Get it?”

“Yeah, get it. So what is that second thing that is supposed to influence our being?”

“The second thing influencing our being is language.”



„The language we use. Chalmers Brothers – that’s just one man, not brothers, the guy has a really weird name – so Chalmers Brothers is of the opinion that language does not only describe but mainly creates. What’s the difference between these two sentences: ‘The sun is shining, what nice weather’, and ‘The sun is shining, what horrible heat’?”

“Depends how one perceives it.”

“No. It’s a decision. If I decide that the weather is nice, that’s what I will focus on. If I say it’s hot, I’m focusing on the heat. If I call somebody an idiot, I will remember him as an idiot. If I call something beautiful, I will remember it as beautiful. Without words, the world doesn’t know beauty or ugliness. Things are as they are. We give value and meaning to them with words. It is up to us what value we are going to attribute them. What we will focus on. Because what we focus on, grows. If you are going to focus on ne-

gative things, they are going to grow. But if you are going to focus on the positive ones... It's a trap: do you see the glass half full, or half empty? I know, being a pessimist is cool. One can be like Dr. House, throwing around wannabe tough one-liners. But is he happy? Happiness can be a choice, my friend."

"What do you mean by that.. friend?" David grimaced. He disliked being called a 'friend' by Roland. They were not friends.

It seemed that Roland noticed his discomfort, and pulled back a little bit. "It depends on what you focus on. Do you look for the best, or the worst in a given situation? Based on that you choose the words to describe things. Based on the words you choose, the thing gets its value – for you, but also for the people around you, who are listening to you. What's even worse – we tend to believe what we hear. If the teacher endlessly repeats that you're dumb, there is a great chance that you will believe her. Even though – as we know already – that's only a distortion of reality."

"I'm not dumb, I simply can't do the assignment according to her instructions," David parroted to prove that he'd already passed this lesson.

"Correct. And if you say that it's hot outside, you immediately start focusing on whether it is – or isn't – really hot. Whether you believe it or doubt it, you've already chosen what you're going to focus on, so you're going to miss a whole lot of other things."

"What things?"

"Uf, there are a million of them. A plane in the sky, the lady next door wearing a nice top –"

"I wouldn't miss that."

“Probably not, you’d be rather happy it’s so hot in that case, wouldn’t you?” Roland chuckled. “One way or another, the language we use is like a lens, a filter. The coloured glass through which we perceive reality. What colour is your reality going to have?”

“Definitely not a pink one.”

“Why not, is the black one so much better?”

“I’ve always been kind of emo,” David shrugged and then laughed at himself.

Roland sat back down in his chair, smiling as well: “To tell you the truth, I have always been fond of the emo aesthetic. Yet, as a lifestyle, I find it rather dangerous, at least when taken to the limit.”

“Why so? You said it is important to recognize your emotions.”

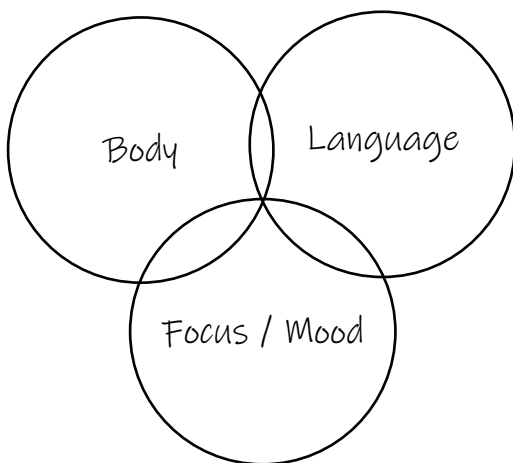
“Yes: to recognize them, name them, embrace them, and then let them go. Not to turn all of them into pain and latch on to it with a death grip. But this is taking us in a different direction than I intended. There is another thing influencing our everyday way of being that I want to talk about.”

“Which is?”

“The third part influencing our way of being is what we **focus on**, and the **mood** we live in. Are we focused on what is bringing us happiness? Do we keep a curious mindset? Or are we endlessly angry? Or hurt? Or scared? I know, the feelings are present no matter what. But are we going to let them control us, or are we simply able to accept them, experience them, and let them go in time?”

“How am I to let them go?”

“By decision. First, you need to be able to simply be with them. Experience them. Feel them. But don’t get stuck on



them. When is the time, put your focus on something else. On the things that are bringing you joy. And you need to work with your language and body to reach a desired state.

You already know that you need to work with your body, because our body is a huge chemical laboratory and keeping it in balance is an art. We are influenced by so many things – by what we eat, how we sleep, the way we walk and sit, how often we are outside, and even how often we hug others.

Usually, I recommend starting a new activity to people. To the ones who suppress their emotions, I recommend art. Painting, drawing, singing. For people who are full of stress, I recommend getting into sports. For people who are full of passion but afraid to show it, I recommend dancing. For people with a lack of confidence, I would recommend starting with martial arts. But this is hard to generalize, dif-

ferent things work for different people. For you, I would recommend to start running. Every day, or every other day. It's simple and it is a good start. And after you figure out what you want to do, get a hobby. But keep your ass moving."

He went silent, staring at David. David was once again surprised by the other man's sudden passionate outburst. "What now?" he asked.

"Does it make sense to you?" Roland pointed at the board.

"I don't know. The part with the body does. But the rest..."

"Hm... All right, let's do two very practical exercises. First, take a paper and pen and draw up a schedule for yourself for the next week. Put down all your lessons, and free afternoons, and plan when you will exercise. I don't care if you run, or do something else, but put it in your schedule. And fill up all the free spaces in it. You are horribly lazy, David, you don't do anything, so fill your time with activities."

David obeyed. He planned a run for every afternoon.

"Ready," he announced after a while, and grew a bit uneasy from the look he was getting from Roland. "Why are you looking at me that way?"

"I was wondering if I should check it." He paused. "Do you need me to?"

"No."

"No, then. It is your life, not mine. And now, the second thing: what mood would you like to have next week?"

"I would like to be... happy."

"Excellent. And what do you look like when you're happy?"

"I don't know," David spread his arms. He still felt oddly nervous.

"Put on a show for me. How would you show that you are happy?"

David leaned back in his chair and threw one leg over the other. Then he clasped his hands over his stomach.

"That's what you look like when you're happy? Like a grumpy cat?"

David tried to smile. The corners of his lips twitched slightly, but he couldn't manage more than that. It made him feel silly, like a puppet on a TV show.

"Excellent. Every time you realize that you're not happy, put yourself in a position that expresses happiness. Either this one or any other.

And the second exercise: during next week, you'll pretend to be an optimist. You won't express yourself negatively. Will you manage that?"

"That will be bloody hard."

"And you can begin with it right now."

"It will be awesome!"

"Good boy."

"I'm not a dog."

"What's wrong about being a dog? They scratch your ears, giving you food... I would like that."

"Woof."

Reality

The bell announced the end of History class. David looked around helplessly. The whole classroom filled with movement; everyone had somewhere to go. Kristýna headed towards Dominika and other friends. Koudela with Patrick and Robert headed for the bathroom. At the first grade, they were going to masturbate in groups, but as they grew older, it got old.

David got anxious. He hadn't been paying attention to it during the lesson because he was focused on taking notes, but now a familiar feeling came back like a heavy coat. *Why is it like this?* David wondered, trying to understand what was happening to him.

Then he realised what it was. He felt lonely. He looked around, looking for someone to talk to, but none of his classmates' faces looked particularly inviting.

His fingers brushed his wrist and slid over the words I want to be happy which he scribbled there during his first class of the day. It was a reminder, so he wouldn't forget about the promise he made to Roland. He pushed his chair into the aisle between the desks and got as comfortable as possible, in a similar position he showed Roland during their last session. The hard part came when he had to model his face to smile, but he managed.

"Watch out, I wanna pass," Dominika tried pushing past him.

“Too bad,” he snapped back, moving his chair to block her way even more.

“You are such an ass,” she barked at him, but she changed her route.

David’s smile broadened; he liked provoking her.

“What are you doing?” Patrick asked as he returned from the bathroom.

“Nothing,” David said.

“You look like an old farmer.”

“What?”

“Yeah,” Patrick sat down to mimic him and made a show of pulling up his shirt and puffing up his stomach to imitate having a fat belly. “Now, all you need to complete the look is to put your legs on a stool, pipe to your mouth and scream…” he paused, as if an idea struck him: “Maria!” he shouted. “Bring me a beer!”

“Fuck you!” Maria retorted, joining the game: “I have to attend the pigs.” She looked meaningfully at the guys around, but it back to bite her quickly:

“So attend us, sweetheart,” Koudela grabbed her around the waist, pushing her onto a desk. Fortunately, it didn’t get any further, because at that moment, the Biology teacher walked in.

“Koudela, are you molesting girls again?”

“I’m not molesting them, I’m pleasing them.”

“You forgot to use this,” Martin threw a condom packet at him.

“At least something that you learned in Biology,” the teacher sighed.

At that moment, David realized that the smile on his face was not a pretense. He was smiling sincerely.

Session 7:

Circle of Creativity

It was their seventh session already. They were more than a half done. The office had become a well-known environment for David. Safe. Comfortable. A place where he'll always get coffee. Where he will either sit in a chair in front of Roland's desk, or on the sofa in the middle of the room. A place where he will march around the room when angry, gesticulating, explaining, asking, or just speaking. And where somebody will always be listening to him. Not like at home. Not like in school! He looked around at the familiar posters on the walls, then at the whiteboard, wondering what new thing he would discover today. There was something new to learn almost every time.

"So. How was it?" Roland asked.

David sipped his coffee, leaned back in the armchair, thought for a while and then answered: "It was all right. But only play pretend for the most part. I was pretending to be something I'm not."

"That can happen. What do you need then?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do you need to be happy?" Roland specified.

"To get out of home," David breathed out, adding: "And out of school."

"What prevents you from dropping school and registering at the job centre?"

"I don't want that."

"So you want to finish school?"

"Yes, I want to finish it. It's just pissing me off." His answers were sour, Roland hit a sore spot again – yes, the school was pissing him off, but all the other alternatives were worse – but by now he had found that it was better to play the man's game rather than resist it, however uncomfortable it could be.

"And after you finish it, then what?"

"Don't know."

"Would you like to go to uni?"

"Don't know. Yes, I would."

"What would you like to study?"

"I don't know!" he snapped and then thought about the question for a while: "I like literature. Doesn't matter anyway, I'll never get accepted to university."

"Why do you think so?"

"Cause I'm stupid."

"Really?"

"Yes. I don't even know if I will graduate from highschool. And even if I do, I won't pass the entrance exams. And my mum doesn't have money anyway, so I will have to work."

"So?"

"So I will work."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Don't know. Probably a cashier at Lidl."

"Will you be happy?"

"No."

“Excellent. So either you go to uni, or you will be unhappy. Which of them are you going to choose?” Roland raised his hands like they were a pair of scales, comparing them. “Studies, unhappiness, studies, unhappiness.”

“I don’t know if I will be happy if I go to uni.”

“Just as you don’t know if you’ll be unhappy if you go work at Lidl,” objected Roland. He looked perfectly calm, as always. “That’s not the point. What would you prefer is the question: studies, or work?”

“Studies,” David sighed.

“Excellent. In that case, we can start talking about how to reach that goal. I would like to introduce another tool to you today,” Roland said and stood up. “This is one of my favourites. It is a tool that allows you to reach things that seem to be unreachable. It’s called the Circle of Creativity.”

“I’m not very creative.”

“Everyone is creative. Only some of us forgot how to do it. Back to the point. Let’s begin with university,” he said, marker already sliding on the board:

Studying at University

“The important question is why do you want to study at university?”

That stunned David.. “I... don’t know,” he blabbered. “I’m curious what it’s like.”

“So that’s it? You are curious?”

“I guess,” he shrugged.

“Or is there something else?” Roland prodded, almost tauntingly, as if he wasn’t satisfied with the answer. He was leaning on the board, a light smile on his face. “Not eager to go to work? Or do you believe that you’ll find a better job with a diploma?”

“The latter,” David admitted. He needed to hear it out loud to realize it was true. “Or I mean, I don’t really wanna work, but I will have to anyway. It’s more about... I don’t know...” he sighed, putting his hands in his lap. “I want to do something interesting, and not end up mopping floors somewhere.”

“You want to have an interesting job. Why?”

“What do you mean why...” he spread his hands. “To be satisfied.”

“If you are going to have an interesting job, will you be satisfied?”

“Don’t know. But I will definitely not be satisfied if I don’t have it.”

“So satisfaction is what you long for.”

David shifted uncomfortably. He didn’t like the way Roland kept pushing the topic. What he was saying didn’t sound right. “It’s not about satisfaction. Or not only that. I just want to be... happy.”

Roland nodded. “So we are back at happiness,” he said. “Is that what it’s all about? To be happy?”

“I guess so.”

“You guess?”

“No, I am certain. That’s what it’s all about. I want to be happy.”

“Excellent,” Roland said and put it on the board:

Studying at University

Happiness

“And what about now? Are you happy?” questions continued.

“No.”

“How come? What are you missing, what do you need to be happy?”

“There are so many things. Money... real friends... a girlfriend...” David surprised himself by his own openness; it was surprisingly easy to admit things he was so ashamed of to Roland. Probably because Roland didn’t judge him. He didn’t show rejection or sympathy, he just nodded and added the information to the board. “My own apartment... possibility to get out of school...” He slowed down. He was starting to run out of ideas.

“Anything else?” Roland prompted him.

“A better relationship with mum...” he said, his heart sinking low. “And a father. I’m missing my father...”

My dad, he thought, but the word sounded too gentle to be spoken out loud.

Roland nodded. “Anything else?”

“Yes. Doing something I would enjoy.”

Roland wrote everything on the board and added a framed word:

Studying at University

Happiness

Reality

Missing money
Missing friends
Missing girlfriend
Bad relationship with mother
Missing father
Missing hobbies

“This is your current reality,” Roland said. “Of course, we could add a thousand little details here, but they are not important. We are focusing on things that are not working for you. Those are the things you want to change. Why? To reach a desired state. Something we call a **Vision**. Your vision is Happiness. Or to phrase it better – to be happy.”

“Does that fit?” He looked at him expectantly.

“So far, yes,” David admitted.

“Nicely put. So far.” Roland put the cap back on the marker.

“So, what do you need to be happy? What is your goal?”

“To be happy, obviously.”

“No, that is your vision,” Roland knocked on the board.

“What do you need to make the vision come true?”

“To have money, real friends, a girl, a job, a father, hobbies and a good relationship with mum,” David recited accor-

ding to the board, but he wasn't trying to be sarcastic – he was simply trying to understand what Roland was trying to tell him.

Studying at University

Vision

Happiness

Reality

Missing money

Missing friends

Missing girlfriend

Bad relationship with mother

Missing father

Missing hobbies

“You won't reach that immediately, will you? So how about we set up a goal you want to reach five years from now?”

David shrugged. “I have no clue what's tomorrow going to be like, much less five years from now.”

“True. But it is in your power to influence tomorrow. Not control it, as you don't have control over anything but yourself, and even that only partly. But you can still influence it. Same as you can influence what you are going to have five years from now on.”

“I guess...” David admitted. “Well, if I start with what's written on the board...”

“Fuck the board,” Roland snapped suddenly, breaking down David’s focus completely. He seemed annoyed by something. “Tell me what you want to have in five years. And don’t hold back. We are talking about dreams here, David. This is a tool that allows people to reach their dreams. What is yours?”

“I don’t know,” David hesitated, “I’ve never thought about it.”

“Fuck you.”

“What?”

“I said, fuck you. Stop lying to me. Have you never been five? Have you never wanted to be a detective? Or an astronaut? What are you doing right now?”

“Ech... well...” David was looking at him, eyes wide, feeling scared and very surprised. Roland looked even more agitated than during their last session and David had no idea what to do. He was so shocked that he didn’t know how to answer the question.

“Generalization, distortion, deletion. What are you doing right now?”

“Is this a test?”

“It’s an intervention. Generalization, distortion, deletion. What are you doing?”

“Deletion,” David sighed.

“Yes. And the two others as well. So stop making an ass out of me and tell me what you want. What you really want!”

“I want to be happy!” David shouted. “I want to visit Peru. I want to have a driver’s license and a good car. I want to play the guitar. I want to be a good singer. I want to have a band and go on tours and have groupies and be famous.”

“Finally, we got somewhere,” Roland smiled, and suddenly he was back to his usual calm and collected self. “So it could be summarised as ‘to be a famous musician’? Singer? Guitarist?”

“Musician. I don’t know exactly what I want to do, but I want to make music.”

“Excellent,” Roland nodded and on the board it went:

Goal

Being famous musician

Vision

Happiness

Reality

Missing money

Missing friends

Missing girlfriend

Bad relationship with mother

Missing father

Missing hobbies

“So this is your goal. There are a number of objectives in it, right? In five years, you will visit Peru. You will have a driver’s license. You will play the guitar. You will learn to sing. You will start a band and do tours with it. About groupies and fame, those will come on their own.”

“Hopefully.”

“Yes, hopefully. If you want to have this in five years, where do you need to be in a year?”

“Well... there will still be time for Peru, the driver’s license and a car. But I should probably get a guitar and learn how to play it. And to sing.”

“What do you need for that?”

“Probably just a guitar to start.”

“And what do you need to get a guitar?”

“Money.”

“How much?”

“For a good guitar? Fifteen thousand, I guess.”

“Could you get it for cheaper?”

“I guess in some second-hand store.”

“Excellent. I’m going to keep the university as an objective as well because I find it important, but I will put the guitar next to it.”

Objectives

University

Guitar

Goal

Being famous musician

Vision

Happiness

Reality

Missing money
Missing friends...

Roland updated the drawing, and turned back to David:
“What means do you have to help you?”

“What means?”

“How much money do you have? Do you know anybody who has a guitar? Do you know anybody who plays? And anyone who’s in a band?”

“I’m broke. I don’t know any guitarists, nor people who have a band.”

“All right,” Roland said and added it on the board:

Objectives

University

Guitar

Means

0 CZK

no contacts

Goal

Being famous musician

Vision

Happiness

Reality

Missing money

Missing friends

Missing girlfriend

Bad relationship with mother

Missing father

Missing hobbies

Then, he asked: "So, what are you going to do? What is your plan?"

David took a deep breath. It was a lot to take in at once, and he was still shaking off the shock, but his mind was already going through the options and spitting out ideas. He took a moment to organize his thoughts and then replied: "I need to get a part-time job and earn some money. And I need to get a cheap guitar."

"What means can you use to do it?"

"I will go through second-hand shops as well as normal music stores. I could also ask people on Facebook if anyone doesn't know about something."

"Excellent. So we have the guitar. What about university?"

"I need to get better grades."

"Really? Why?"

David shrugged. "Well... I guess the grades aren't that important, are they? The main thing is to pass the entrance exam."

"The entrance exam for which school?"

David went silent.

"You have no clue where to go, right? That's all right, we'll figure it out. Here comes your next homework: for next week, make a list of all your strong and weak points, as well as the things you enjoy and the things you don't. And in the meantime, let me explain the rest of the Circle of Creativity to you."

Roland spent a few more moments on the drawing, talking as he did:

"When you take action, you are creating a new reality. Then, you have an opportunity to evaluate what happened. How did your reality change? Is your vision still the same?"

Circle of Creativity



Do you still have the same goals and objectives? Do you have new means? What about your plan? What is your next action? And you continue like this until you reach what you desire.

When putting down a Circle of Creativity, you always start with Reality. It's on the bottom, like the ground we stand

on,” Roland stomped on the ground, and David had to smile at the silly gesture that reminded him of small princesses from cartoon fairy tales. “Then, you ponder your Vision.

There is a thing you have to understand about the Vision. In a sense, it’s unreachable. Ok, that’s not precise. It’s unattainable. Unsustainable. It is mostly an abstract concept, you can feel it for a while, but it will not stay present permanently. In one day, you can feel happy ten times, miserable thirty, curious once, and horny six.... eh, sixty times.”

David chuckled.

“So, the Vision is about the state of being. It’s a decision of the mind. Like we talked about it last time, do you remember? You’ve decided that you want to be happy, and you’re doing what you’re doing in order to be happy. So at any point of this Circle,” Roland pointed at the drawing, “if you catch yourself not being happy, you can stop and think about your course of action. What should you do differently to actually be happy in the process?”

“But I’m not happy right now,” David muttered.

“Now-now?”

“Not now-now, this is actually pretty alright, but in general.”

“Well, as we practised last week. Just do things that will support your happiness. This will take time, David, and it will come only with practice.”

“All right. I’m gonna practice.”

“Do that. And don’t forget to do your homework.”

Reality

He found a used acoustic guitar for sale. It was pretty shabby, but it cost only five hundred. He thought about asking his mum for some money but it wouldn't feel right. This was his dream, he should reach it on his own. There were a last hundred and fifty crowns in his pocket, and he urgently needed some new jeans. The guitar would have to wait.

He went to his favourite second-hand shop.

"And what are you looking for?" the store owner barked right as the door closed behind him. It was an elderly woman, short and wrinkly, and David had already seen her in all her different moods: sweet like fresh strawberries, and bitter like sorrel. The moodiness of Mrs Makešová was legendary, and it wasn't unusual to get thrown out of her shop for seemingly no reason.

"I'm looking for some trousers," he did his best to sound polite.

"Over there," Makešová took him to one of the long alleys made of clothing racks hidden in the old train hall where the shop was located. The whole place smelled of dust and plastic wrap, but it held a certain charm. Most of the goods were fit for either granddads or people twice his size, but he spotted a pair of jeans that looked all right.

"I will try these on," David said, reaching for them, but then he paused when he saw the price tag: "Two hundred. I only have one fifty."

“Would you like to make some money?” Mrs Makešová visibly perked up at his comment, sensing an opportunity.

“I would,” David admitted. “Do you need a hand?”

“I’m expecting a delivery on Saturday and my son will be away in Prague. So yes, I need somebody who would help me unload the stuff. I will give you a hundred per hour.”

“All right. When should I be here?”

“At eight. Give me your number.”

They exchanged contacts and on Saturday, five minutes before eight, David was waiting in front of Shoe Lane, as the store was called, even though they didn’t sell almost any shoes there. Surprisingly, he didn’t have a hangover – he didn’t have money to spend, so he opted to stay at home on Friday instead of going out and read *A Knight in Rusty Armour* instead.

Mrs Makešová met him five minutes after eight.

“Here you are,” she welcomed him, all smiles and friendly pats on the arm, ushering him inside. “Come in. Would you like to have something? Coffee? Tea?” Just as she said it, they heard the brakes of the delivery van skidding on the gravel outside. “It’s here, go and unload the delivery, I will join you in a bit.”

A middle-aged driver in a dusty denim jacket greeted him by way of grumbling outside and readied to open the back of the van for him. “Where do you want it?” he asked David.

“Don’t know,” he shrugged, looking around, looking around for Mrs Makešová. She disappeared somewhere in the hall. So it’s up to me to deal with it, he thought glumly. “We’ll need to get the boxes inside. How close can you come with the van?”

"I can park it right in front of the entrance," the driver said. "But hurry up, I have a delay."

That's not our fault, is it? Why should I be in a rush, David thought but said nothing.

The driver unloaded forty big boxes by the shop's entrance. Before he departed, Mrs Makešová finally appeared, signed something for him and then proceeded to drag David back inside. She took him through the whole hall to a small storage room hidden behind a curtain, full of other boxes. "Put everything in here," she ordered.

Two hours later, his back felt like someone ran it through a hydraulic press, but it was done. Yet, it wasn't over. As he approached Makešová to let her know, she barked: "Here is your coffee." The mug was ice cold to the touch. He took a sip anyway. It tasted terrible, he was sure not even truck drivers would be willing to drink such swill. He didn't have time for another sip of the horrible concoction, because Makešová was already calling him back to work.

He spent the next five hours rearranging the boxes. He would carry them to her, she would sort out the clothes and put them on hangers, and then it was his job to put them on the racks. At the end of the day, he was exhausted and his whole body ached, but there was a smile on his face. His wallet was one thousand richer. Makešová could be generous.

On Monday, he bought the guitar.

Session 8: Success Chart

David's list was pretty empty.

Strong points

intelligent
curious

Weak points

coward
boring
ugly
useless
weak
stupid

I enjoy

computer games
games in general
creation of games
reading
movies
theater
politics

I hate

school
work
cleaning
shopping

"I can see that you spent a lot of time on it," Roland remarked with sarcasm.

"I did. I spent the entirety of Civics thinking about it."

Roland chuckled. "I had hoped that by now you'd be taking our sessions more seriously."

David scratched behind his ear nervously. The remark made his heart give a guilty pang. "I do take it seriously," he mumbled sheepishly. "I just couldn't come up with anything else. It feels so weird to write about myself like this."

Roland shrugged. "Would you be able to write it about someone else?"

David realized that he would, and humbly admitted it.

"How come you see others so easily, but you are not willing to see yourself?" Seeing David's painful expression, Roland pressed his shoulder in a reassuring gesture. "Don't take it too harshly. You are not different from others. For most people, it is much easier to judge others than themselves. I don't see anything here about music. Didn't you say you want to be a musician?"

"I do. Just... I don't know much about music."

"Really? What's your favourite album?"

"*Are You Experienced* by Jimi Hendrix."

"And what do you like about it?"

"Don't know... well, Hendrix is cool, because his music has a lot of rawness and ferocity that just bites into your ears in a good way. He plays the bass like a group of cats would with a single mouse, and he just makes it all flow really well."

Roland raised his eyebrows at him. "Do you realize that you've started expressing yourself quite differently than usual right then?"

"No," David admitted.

“It wouldn’t surprise me at all if you were another example of artistic blindness. People often fall for an illusion of superiority: the less they know about something, the more confident they are about it. On the contrary, people who truly understand something, are more willing to admit that they don’t know much. It’s not up to me to judge how much you know about music, but I’d be willing to bet that you know more than me.

The goal of today’s session is to help you concentrate on what you’re good at. Have you heard about the Pareto principle?”

“Never heard about it.”

“The Pareto principle is an economic theory. Paret said that roughly 80% of consequences come from 20% of causes. For example, 80% of the company’s income comes from 20% of its customers, the remaining 20% from the remaining 80%. Thus the rule of 80 on 20. Got it?”

“So basically you’re saying that four-fifths of the customers are wasting the company’s resources, right? Because they only bring one-fifth of the total revenue?”

“Yes.”

“All right. So what?”

“I’m getting to it. The Pareto principle is only a theoretical model, but it provides a useful metaphor, which is applicable to different areas of life. You spend 80% of your free time doing activities that bring you 20% of your happiness, but only 20% of it on activities which bring you 80% of your happiness. You spend 80% of your time with people who bring you only 20% of your happiness, and only 20% with the people who are truly important to you. And so on.

Many people spend 80% of their attention on the things they're bad at, but only 20% on things they're good at."

"Isn't that normal? To focus on getting better?"

"Getting better might be commendable, but the focus, that's a really interesting topic. It's connected to language again. Let's say I'm bad at cooking, and I keep persuading myself that I have to get better. Therefore I'm constantly reminding myself I'm bad. So I start to believe it. I focus on my misery. It reflects my general view. I know how I messed up the soup, the dumplings, and the chicken. Yet, what if – when cooking – I focus on the things I'm actually good at? Like preparing eggs, for example. I know that I'm really good at making them. In fact, I am so confident that I can experiment while making them. Through experimentation with eggs, I can learn other things that might be useful in other areas of cooking. And it's not like I'm abandoning cooking different things completely, I just take pride in my eggs, and I use them as my stepping stone, through which I can climb up to the stars."

Once again, Roland got quite passionate with his speech. Mid-way through he stood up, gesticulating with his hands in a manner that was so amusing to David that he started chuckling. "I guess you really like your eggs," he said when the other man finished.

"I do," Roland sat back with a smile. "And I also know that I can be rather good in the kitchen if I really want to, but I mostly don't. What I'm trying to say is... if you focus on your weak sides – as you obviously do according to what's on your list – you focus on misery. Therefore the misery grows. But if you try to focus on your strong sides... I'm sure there are many more than what you see right now."

“Like what?”

“How should I know? I spend one hour a week with you. You have to know that for yourself. But if you want a little boost... in my eyes, you are really bright, since you are getting my lectures rather quickly. You’re handsome even though you might not realize it yet. I would advise you to start taking better care of yourself, it will do wonders. But you didn’t ask me for advice. You are very capable. Damn, you successfully broke into a store.”

“I got caught.” David felt awkward about being the recipient of such compliments, especially coming from another man. He had to admit that it did make him feel a bit better though.

“Doesn’t matter. I wouldn’t even know where to start if I wanted to break into one. Okay, that’s not true, I would start with Google, but still, I find it impressive.”

“Should you really be encouraging me to break into stores?”

“I’m not encouraging you to continue in pursuing the burglar career, I’m only stating that you are a capable young man, who uses a number of excuses so that he can pity himself.”

“Ouch,” David pulled a face but this time, probably because of Roland’s playful tone, he didn’t take it personally.

“Yeah, well. Anyway, do you understand what I’m trying to tell you?”

“That you like me?” David batted his eyes at him playfully, still in a good mood.

“Jesus. I’m trying to tell you that if you are going to focus on what you’re good at, your worldview will get much more optimistic... and your strengths will grow faster. Because

what you focus on, grows. Therefore, I would like to introduce you to the so-called Success Chart. Are you ready?"

"Bring it on."

"The Success chart helps you identify what you've succeeded at. It has several steps. The first one is **Insight**. You understand something you didn't before. For example, now you might understand that if you focus only on what you're bad at, only the bad things will grow."

As usual, Roland approached the board to illustrate his words:

1. Insight

"The next one is **New understanding**. Basically, you take something you already know but look at it from a different perspective. For example..."

"For example when I thought that others were responsible for me robbing the store, but then I realized that I was the one who got myself into it."

"Yes, basically."

1. Insight 2. New understanding

"The third item is **Identified mistake**. Do you have any in mind?"

"That I left my hood on while attempting burglary?"

Roland laughed at that, and added the third item on the board:

1. Insight
2. New understanding
3. Identified mistake

“Another success on the list is **Action**. An action could be for example inviting a girl for a date tomorrow. Of course, it’s also possible that you perceive that she’s in a bad mood, and so you delay your action and invite her the next day.”

1. Insight
2. New understanding
3. Identified mistake
4. Action

“Delaying actions endlessly leads to completely different actions which we could call not doing anything. Which could be seen as Waiting & Hoping. Taking action is important. It’s also all right to delay it, but unless delayed or cancelled for a good reason, it should be taken sooner or later. Because only actions bring the last source of success. Result.”

1. Insight
2. New understanding
3. Identified mistake
4. Action
5. Result

“The Result can be anything,” Roland continued. “If you study and get an A, or if you don’t study and get an F.”

“That’s not a great success then.”

“Isn’t it? If you identify the mistake in it? Those categories can intermingle. Awareness is key. Most people stumble through life unaware of their state. They don’t understand what is happening to them. But your life is a consequence of your actions, or inactions, which are still a form of action. Either you react to things as they come and you remain unaware. Or you are proactive, aware of your actions and you control your behaviour.”

“There are always things you cannot control. Earthquakes, infections...”

“Yes, but you can control your behaviour. You can also lower the chances of something happening to you. Can you avoid them for sure? Gosh no. But, for example, not travelling to areas where earthquakes are common can lower your chances of being caught in one. Or, if you do travel to such a place, reading up on how to react during one raises your chances of survival. Does that mean you will avoid an earthquake for sure? No. Some things are out of our hands. Is it possible to be ready for anything that can come? Probably not. But can you become more resilient and able to handle different risks that may arise? Yes, by signing up

for a survival course, and through thousands of other ways. And by reminding yourself it doesn't matter that you really suck at one thing, if you know you are really good at another. Get better at what you are already good at. Don't let it stop you from learning new things, but pay 80% of your attention to what you are good at, and only 20% to things you are bad at."

Roland cooled down a little bit and added: "And don't take me too literally. This 80 to 20 shit is just a metaphor."

David chuckled. He was getting used to Roland's swearing. It was still rare, but not shocking anymore.

"Got it," he replied.

"Do you? Let's see. Why should you focus on your successes?"

"To get better at what I am already good at?"

"And to get even better at it in the process. It's said that one needs 10,000 hours to become a master at something. You can become a master musician... if you will play for 10,000 hours. But be careful what you practice. If you learn to play the wrong tune and play it for 10,000 hours, you will only be a master at playing the wrong tune in the end."

David did a quick calculation in his head at these words. *One hour per day, 365 hours a year, let's say 400 to make it easier, 10 thousand divided by 400, that would be... twenty-five years. God.*

"So you're telling me that if I practice one hour per day, it will take me more than twenty-five years to become a master?"

Roland shrugged. "It's another principle. A metaphor, not a proven fact. But it makes sense to me. Practice eight

hours a day and it will take you only three years to become proficient. Hm?”

“Damn.”

“Mastery takes time. But you can do it. Anybody can. Anyway, do you have anything better to do?”

“I guess not.”

“And it can be useful in other ways as well.”

“How?”

“If you focus on your successes in playing an instrument, it can make you feel better. But the important thing is to be able to recognize your successes. Let’s do a little practice. Can you name your successes in today’s session?” Roland pointed at the chart.

David studied it carefully.

Success Chart

1. Insight
2. New understanding
3. Identified mistake
4. Action
5. Result

“Well... my insight would be that you introduced me to the Success chart.”

“Is that my success, or yours?”

“Yours, I guess.”

“The way you put it, yes, it’s my success, and I wouldn’t call it insight, but an action. Try changing the sentence you used to turn it into your own success.”

“How?”

“Make it yours. Use the sentence and connect it with the chart.”

“Well, I...”

“Now a verb.”

“Um... I... understood.... the Success chart... that you presented.”

“Better. Now, a new understanding.”

“My new understanding... might be that... I now understand that by focusing on my weak sides I screw myself over.”

“Because?”

“Because I constantly focus on the negative things, thus bringing negativity into my life,” David intentionally mimicked Roland’s way of speaking.

“A rather flowery description, but I’ll allow it,” Roland smirked a little at him. “What about your identified mistake?”

“I used, well, incorrect language while talking about my gained insight.”

“I wouldn’t say incorrect, but unsuitable, disempowering. Now, your action?”

“I planned to come on time and I succeeded.”

“All right. And Result? Can you recognize one?”

“The way I sit,” David said proudly. It was true, throughout the whole session so far he’d been sitting up straight with his legs aligned. “It’s not easy, but I’ve been focusing on my body posture and it’s starting to come to me more... naturally. I practised the whole week, same as your positivism.”

“You mean optimism.”

“Whatever.”

“My optimism?”

“No. Just optimism.”

Roland smiled. “You are ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“To start your community service.”

“And I wasn’t ready until now?”

Roland shrugged. “I have no way of knowing that for sure. But I think you weren’t. If you started immediately after our first session, you would most likely suffer throughout most of it. Because you would focus entirely on how shitty it was and how you could be doing something better. Like playing video games.”

David smirked at the comment. “Yeah, I guess you’re right about that.”

“Do you think it will be different because we waited with it?”

“I think so. I will try to focus on the successes. On what I’m getting out of the experience.”

“That could help. And there’s one more thing you can focus on.”

“What else?”

“Can’t you figure it out on your own?”

David thought about it. “How about... what can I bring to others?” he asked, looking at Roland hesitantly.

Roland smiled. “I know it may seem like it but this is not a test, David. And I don’t have a key with all the right answers, just my own opinions. It’s your answers that are important. So tell me, are you happy with your answer?”

“I think I am,” David realised.

“You think?”

“I am.”

“Then that’s all you need.”

Reality

"You're new here, aren't you lad?" an old voice rasped in David's direction. It came from a sweet-looking old granny in a wheelchair, who was peeking out of her doorway at him as he mopped the floor in the hallway. It was his second day working at the retirement home.

"Yes," he admitted, pausing his work to look back at her. "I'm here just for a few weeks. To help."

"Part-time job?"

"Not quite."

The granny rolled into the corridor to look at him better. She was wearing a long black dress and a pair of old sunglasses, even though she had no need for them indoors. She took them off after getting closer, revealing thick round glasses beneath them. "A gift from my grandson. He said I look cool in them."

"They suit you," David smiled. He liked the mischievous twinkle in her eye.

"So what are you doing here?"

"Well... I'm here on probation."

"On what?"

"As punishment. Community service."

"Really?" She looked at him with curiosity. "And what did you do?"

"I robbed a store."

"You? You don't look like a thief."

“Don’t judge a book by its cover.”

She laughed at that. “Well, if you say so. How long did you say you’ll be here?”

“Around two months.”

“Ah. Say, lad...” she reached into her pocket. It rustled and jingled with the sound of coins and other knick-knacks. “Do you like coffee?”

David nodded.

“Me too, even though all they have here is the swill from the vending machine that tastes like old shoes. How about you run downstairs and get us both a cup, hm? It’s not that easy for me to get down, plus the harpies that take care of us wouldn’t let me. They’d say I’ve had my coffee today already, that a second one wouldn’t do me good, but they can bugger off! What’s the reason to be alive if I can’t indulge in things I like?”

“Are you sure?” David asked, taking the coins she shoved in his hand.

“You know I am.”

David went and came back in a few moments with two steaming cups, but the hallway was empty. He headed toward the nearest open door; the label on it read “Marie Soukupová”. The room was small and fairly sparse. There was a bed, with a Zimmer frame parked next to it, a wardrobe and a small table. The table had a vase full of flowers, a fountain pen and some notepaper on it. The only other decoration was a shelf with a few picture frames, David assumed they must be of the old woman’s family. The woman herself was looking peacefully out the window. He approached her awkwardly. “Ah, here you are,” she glanced at him

over her shoulder, and then nodded at the view outside: "Look, isn't it beautiful?"

Through the window, he could see the downward slope of the hill the building stood on, leaving an open view of Brno with the setting sun just hitting the rooftops, making them glow like liquid gold.

"Yeah, it is," David admitted.

The granny took her cup from him but squeezed it a bit too hard and spilt the hot liquid over herself. "Ah, bollocks," she hissed in annoyance.

"Hold on," David quickly placed his own cup on the windowsill and started looking around for a rag or something to help her clean up with.

"Leave it," she waved her hands dismissively at him, "it's nothing."

"But - "

"No buts, I am old enough to know what I want. What about you, lad? Are you old enough to know?"

He shrugged, not really expecting the conversation to turn in this direction.

"That's not an answer."

"I know what I want," he replied, somewhat reluctantly.

"And what is it you want?"

"I want to be a guitar player."

"Do you play?"

"Yes."

"My son plays the guitar."

"Really?"

"Yes. He teaches it at a university here in Brno."

"That's brilliant."

"Sometimes, he performs at concerts."

“And how about you? Do you play anything?”

“With these hands?” she stretched a shaky palm in front of herself, shaking her head. No wonder she spilt the coffee; how come I didn’t realize before that she could barely even hold that cup? he berated himself.

“Would you like me to help you drink it?”

“Oh no. Leave it be, lad. What is your name?”

“David.”

“I am Marie,” she offered him a hand.

David shook it carefully, giving her a small smile. He liked her.

“No, I don’t play anything, David. When I was younger, I played the guitar, flute and tambourine. But mostly, I sang.”

“You used to be a singer?”

“Yes. And a good one. I even had a few concerts. But I wasn’t a party member, and after sixty-eight, they wouldn’t let me perform anymore. By the time we got independence, I was too old to come back to it. So instead of singing, I spent my life working in a factory, and the only place I would get to do music was around a campfire. My son inherited our talent. Mine and my husband’s. And now he’s living out our dreams. Or his dreams. He always wanted to play. All right, maybe not when he was a child, but he came around to it in time, and now he is on his path to success. He even wants to publish his own record, or whatever they call it these days.”

“That’s amazing,” David smiled and reached for another sip of his coffee. Marie mimicked him – she grasped her cup with both hands and sipped at it carefully. This time not even a drop spilt.

“Yes, it is,” she agreed. “How about tomorrow you come and play something for us here, David?”

“I don’t have anything to perform yet. I only started two weeks ago.”

“Then you’d better practice. But before you stop working here, I want to hear you play. Am I clear?”

“Clear,” David smiled, this time a little wider. He expected to hate the work at the senior centre, but now he was starting to think that maybe it wasn’t going to be that terrible.

Session 9: What works, what doesn't work

David had changed. It felt as though he had grown several centimetres taller in the two months since their last session. His back got straighter. The constant sulky expression faded, replaced by a curious smile. The wrinkle which was previously permanently etched on his forehead, caused by the constant squinting of his eyes, disappeared. And there were little sparkles nested in his eyes now – those delighted Roland the most. For the first time since the beginning of their journey, Roland had a feeling that David finally had a zest for life.

“How are you doing, David?” Roland welcomed him, gesturing for him to take a seat and pushing an espresso towards him. He prepared it a few moments before the boy got there as a friendly gesture.

David took a seat. “I’m all right,” he said.

The rather vague answer wasn’t really a good sign, but if nothing else, it at least meant David’s vocabulary lost a bit of its usual venom. His voice was calmer as well.

“That’s for me?” David looked at the espresso. “Thank you.” He lifted the mug and immediately grimaced at the taste.

“Something wrong?” Roland raised an eyebrow.

"You put two sugars in it, didn't you?" David said.

"That's how you take it, no? Or do I remember it wrong?"

"Your memory's fine, it's how I used to drink it. But lately, I'm trying to limit sugar."

"Ah. How come?"

"An acquaintance of mine keeps nagging me about it." This time Roland raised both his eyebrows. David noticed but didn't elaborate. "It doesn't matter. Just somebody I met."

"A girlfriend?"

"She's a bit too old for that."

Roland shrugged. "I never minded older women."

"She's eighty-two."

"But that might be a too-large gap," Roland acquiesced. "So you made some friends at the retirement home?"

"Something like that," David agreed.

"What's it like there?"

"It's all right. The nurses are satisfied with my work and the locals like me."

"What is your job there?"

"Cleaning mostly. I sweep and mop the floors, and clean up after dinner, then I go chat with the elderly for a while in the common room. I play chess with Tom - I'm completely rubbish at it, but he enjoys teaching me. And Marie often forces me to sing for them."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"Yeah, a lot actually. I usually can't wait to go back and talk to them."

"That's wonderful. And what about the rest of your life?"

"Same old, pretty much."

"Truly?" Roland asked. "Did you know that your mother called me today?"

“Yeah, she mentioned. She would like to start coming here too.”

“Yes, but that’s not all. She also said that you are like a whole new person now. Less angry, more talkative and helpful.”

“I guess,” David scratched behind his ear awkwardly.

“How come?”

“I just realised that she has a lot on her plate and that she could use some help.”

“So the relationships in your family got better too. And what about school?”

David shrugged. “Still the same. Koudela is still an arse, I still don’t have a girlfriend, though it seems that Kristýna broke up with her boyfriend. I am starting to talk with Dominika now and then, but I stopped going out to drink with them. I just don’t have the time for it. And I almost stopped smoking, because when I run, my lungs hurt and I want to get in shape. The teachers are slowly stopping to ignore me, so I have to start studying again, and to be fair, I’m behind on a lot of stuff.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“I was thinking about asking Dana to help me with studying. I just don’t know when that could be. I have no time left for it. I run in the mornings, then go to the retirement home right after school and I’m there on Saturdays as well, and on Sundays, I practise on the guitar.”

“So you got yourself a guitar.”

“Yeah. It’s an antique, pretty beat up and sounds like shit, but it’s better than nothing.”

Roland leaned back in his chair, a satisfied expression on his face. “I would almost proclaim that we are finished here.

Everything in your life seems to be fine. Or is there still something that's not working out?"

David shrugged. "I still don't have a girl," he grinned a little.

Roland smiled. "I think that's a challenge I'll leave up to you. You don't have to come next week. Let's keep the last two of our sessions for after you're done with your community service. And considering that should be right before Christmas and New Year's, I suggest we meet each other in January. Does that sound alright? Just in case, here's my business card. Email me if needed. Or if it's really bad, call me. But that's only for serious matters – it might surprise you, but even I have a personal life, and if my clients called me every time they had a little heartache, I could open a call centre."

Reality

David was nervous. He was standing in front of a polished wooden door inside the Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts. Everything about the building had a certain air of prestige. The door loomed over him, making him feel small in comparison. His hands were shaking a little. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he mustered the courage to knock. Nobody answered. He waited for a moment and then tried again, this time louder.

“Enter!” boomed from the other side of the door.

David opened the door. The room was spacious, the walls painted a light blue. Most of the wooden floor was covered by a carpet with ornamental patterns. Three music stands stood in a row on his left, and a piano was perched neatly in the corner. Huge windows with a view of Komenské Square lined the opposite wall. To his right was a door leading to another room, and Radim Soukup stood in it with his arms crossed. The man was quite tall, with a slim frame and a balding head. He regarded David with a stern expression on his face.

“So, you must be David. Do you have a guitar?”

David took it down from his shoulders and pulled it out of its cover.

“Show me,” Mr Soukup took it from him and observed it carefully. “This is a piece of shit,” he proclaimed. “Wait here.” He disappeared into the next room and returned

with a different guitar. Unlike David's, it was made of solid wood, probably spruce, and stained a dark brown. It looked amazing.

"Woah," David exhaled, gazing at it with open adoration.

"You can borrow it for today. But next time return with a proper instrument. Well then, sit down and show me what you can do."

David looked around helplessly.

"What is it?"

"I don't see any chairs."

Mr Soukup nodded to the piano stool.

David sat down and adjusted the guitar. It wasn't his. He shifted uncomfortably a few times and then tested the strings. "That's it?" the teacher lashed out.

"What do you want me to play?"

"Show me what you know."

David took a deep breath and stroked the strings. He began strumming the chords of *Slunečná hrobka* by Blue Effect, his hands were a bit unsteady but it sounded alright. After a moment he began singing along.

"I told you to play, not sing," Soukup snapped at him.

"I'm sorry," David mumbled, embarrassed.

"Don't apologize, and simply listen to what I am telling you. Go on, play, what are you waiting for?"

David sincerely hoped it would get better. But it didn't. His hands were sweaty, fingers tripping one over another, the rhythm about as steady as a house of cards. He couldn't take his eyes off a thick vein on Soukup's forehead. It seemed to pulse stronger every second.

"Enough!" the teacher shouted. "My mother told me you practised. But it doesn't look like it at all. No, this won't do."

I may have promised to her that I'd take you in, but this is beyond me. I teach at a university, dammit, I'm not going to waste my time with such a hopeless amateur. You are holding it completely wrong, can't you feel it? Get lost, get a teacher for beginners, and come back in five years. Or better yet, don't come back at all."

David jumped on his feet: "You're such an asshole!" he hissed. His body shook with anger and embarrassment.

Soukup's eyes widened at that. "What did you just say to me?" He stomped towards David, who shrank away in fear, scared that the older man would hit him, but Soukup only grabbed his guitar out of his hands and headed away. "Get out," ground out. He passed by David's guitar, which was propped up beside the door and kicked it towards him. It clattered to the ground, its fragile neck breaking on impact. "And take this junk with you."

"You broke it!" David screamed, his fear gone and fury firmly back in place. "You will pay me for that!"

"I already did. I take two thousand for a lesson. That's ten times more than this piece of crap is worth. But I will give you a piece of advice for free: leave guitars alone. You have no talent."

Session 10:

Courage

In the morning, he yelled at mom. He argued with his sister as they were leaving for school. Before he left for the session, he got into a fight with Koudela. He lost.

"How are you?" Roland asked him.

"Shitty."

Everything was shit. The world was a thundercloud full of petrol and David felt like he was getting ready to light a match and set it ablaze.

Roland leaned back in his chair, watching David as he was adding a third spoon of sugar to his coffee. "Only two months and we're back to where we started," Roland sighed. He seemed sad.

David shrugged.

"Why didn't you call me?"

"You said not to bother you."

A look of sad realisation appeared on Roland's face. "If so, then I'm sorry. I would prefer you bothering me a hundred times over what had happened. Whatever it actually was. Would you like to tell me about it?"

"There's nothing to tell."

"Truly?"

"Yes!"

David was staring intently out of the window, refusing to meet the other man's eyes. Roland followed his gaze. A snowstorm was raging outside. The trams were definitely going to get stuck and the whole city get gridlocked.

"Do you still run?" Roland asked.

"In this?" David sneered.

"And do you still play the guitar?"

"No. I quit."

Roland raised an eyebrow at that; a gesture that annoyed many people, but David didn't even notice, since he kept looking out the window. "Why did you quit?"

"I have no talent."

"Who told you that?"

"A teacher at the Janáček Academy."

"How did you meet a teacher from there?"

"Doesn't matter."

Roland didn't reply and just kept looking at him. He was silent for so long, that David's resolve finally cracked and he shot a glance at him. It didn't last long, but as he averted his eyes again, he reluctantly began to explain.

"He's the son of an acquaintance," he muttered. "She set up a few lessons with him for me, but that git kicked me out of the first one and trampled my guitar."

"He trampled your guitar?"

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing."

Roland went silent again.

"I called him an arsehole."

"And why would you do that?"

"Because he kept yelling at me and told me that I have no talent."

"And then?"

"Nothing. I left."

"With a trampled guitar."

"Yeah."

"Do you still have it?"

"I threw it out," David lied. In reality, he stashed it beneath his bed back home. He couldn't bring himself to get rid of it.

Roland nodded. "So that's how much you value yourself? Somebody steps on your dream – literally – and you immediately give up?"

"What the fuck do you want from me?"

"I don't want anything from you. Although I wish you'd have more respect for yourself. You are a beautiful human being, David, and it seems that you've forgotten about it again."

"That's so gay."

"If you say so. I don't have any problems with gay people. Who I do have a problem with, are cowards. Bulgakov wrote that 'Cowardice is the greatest sin'. You had to learn about him in school. Or have you not gotten to him yet?"

"We're doing the Decadent movement right now. And I'm not a coward!"

"I didn't say that you are a coward. But I'm saying that you behave like one. One failure and you're giving up already. Did you know that I wrote a book? It took me seven years until it finally got published. One of the reviews I received said that it was just boring, empty bullshit. Do you think I let that stop me? One time a girl refused me because according to her, I acted like a puppy. So I shrugged and decided to be a wolf instead."

Have you seen any Rocky movies? 'It ain't about how hard you hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward. How much you can take and keep moving forward.' So somebody stepped on your dream. And your reaction is to immediately fall back into self-pity. To lash out in anger like a wounded animal. Stay put, I haven't finished yet. 'The world belongs to those who don't shit themselves.' It's a quote supposedly by Bukowski. I never liked him and his work much, but this fits.

It's about time you stopped acting like a boy and started acting like a man. This is your life! Make the best out of it. Who cares what some arse told you? If you want to play – if your heart lights up whenever you hear your favourite riff, if your fingers itch with the urge to grab a guitar, so do it! Who cares what others think? There will always be somebody ready to criticise you! It's up to you whether you decide to listen to them, or not. Do yourself a favour and get yourself the book called *The Four Agreements*, it's written there clearly: What other people say says nothing about you. It only says how they themselves see you. But you are not what they see in you. Unless you choose to be."

Roland got up and went to his desk. He opened up a drawer and rustling noises could be heard for a moment. Then, he returned and handed David three thousand crowns. "Here. This is for a new guitar."

David's jaw dropped.

"Stop staring at me and take it. Go and buy yourself a proper guitar. If you want to be a musician, then be one."

"I can't take this," David said.

"Yes, you can. It is an opportunity you won't get every day. If I were you, I'd seize it. Get a guitar and either buy or

borrow *The Four Agreements*, read it, and then I suggest you look for a part-time job because I expect you to pay me back." He stretched out his hand, and after a moment of thinking, David accepted the money.

As he was leaving, he turned back again: "Why do you do all this?" he mumbled sheepishly.

"Because I care for you," Roland said. "Because it hurts me to see you destroying yourself. I may not act as a professional, but I act with my heart. No one will ever convince me that I shouldn't act with my heart."

Reality

“The novel *A Knight in Rusty Armour* is a mirror of each one of us,” David began. He was standing in front of the class, giving an oral presentation.

“Once upon a time, there was a knight who considered himself to be kind and loving and good. He had a wife, a son and a nice castle and he would often go for crusades. He wore his armour so often that he barely took it off, until his own wife forgot what he looked like, and his son had never even seen his face. In the end, his wife threatened to leave him if he didn’t take off the armour. The knight tried – and found out that he couldn’t.

Same as the knight, we all hide behind our own armour. It is a mask we put on in front of others. Our image. False self-confidence. A game we play for so long until it becomes a part of us and we don’t know how to stop it any more. As the king’s jester told the knight: ‘We are all stuck in a kind of armour. Yours is merely easier to find.’

Our armour blinds us. We can’t see other people through the visor, we bump into them clumsily, causing them pain. And so, the unfortunate knight stepped on both the smith’s and the king’s feet and even sat on a squirrel at one point. Not to mention how he hurt his wife and son as well. And we do the same. We have our image. We won’t admit our pain. We won’t cry. We won’t show weakness. We won’t tell others we care for them because of our pride.

'You are afraid, that is why you put on the armour in the first place,' said Merlin, the sorcerer, to the knight. The knight is afraid of getting hurt by swords and axes. People can get hurt by the words and actions of others. Armour protects us from their blows. But it alienates us from others as well.

Merlin then sent the knight on a journey to get rid of the armour. During this journey, the knight had to pass through three castles – The Castle of Silence, The Castle of Knowledge, and The Castle of Will and Daring.

In the first castle, the knight was all alone, facing a long, endless silence. There was nobody to talk to. He had to be by himself. And so he started to think about himself and the ones dear to him.

'He sat still and listened to the silence. (...) Nor had he heard Juliet [his wife] when she tried to tell him how she felt - especially when she was sad. (...) In fact, one of the reasons why he'd taken to leaving his armour on all the time was that it muffled the sound of Juliet's sad voice. All he had to do was pull down his visor, and he could shut her out.'

As he realised all that, he began to cry incessantly. And thanks to his tears, the armour got rusty and started to slowly fall apart.

In the second castle, the knight had to answer riddles. One of them hit close to his heart. He realised that he needed the love of his family because he didn't love himself. In fact, he needed the love of all the women he saved from dragons and of all the people he fought for. He had hoped that as long as they cared for him, it would be alright that he himself did not.

Just like the knight, people do a lot of things for others because they long for their love. And they too, often need it from others because they don't have it for themselves.

From the third castle, a horrible dragon appeared. The knight has fought dragons many times before – but this time he was without his sword, and his armour was almost gone. This dragon was bigger and stronger than any others that the knight encountered before. 'I am the Dragon of Fear and Doubt,' the dragon said to him. The first two times they crossed paths, the knight fled from the dragon. He was too scared that he wouldn't be able to defeat him. But the third time they met, the knight walked straight into the flames, with confidence. And the flames didn't touch him. The dragon kept getting smaller and smaller, until he disappeared completely.

And so the journey continued...

The novel *A Knight in Rusty Armour* consists of many powerful ideas that might speak to you. Give it a shot. And don't let the spoilers discourage you – I might have said a lot, but it was still barely a hundredth of what the book contains."

David folded his papers and looked at the teacher. He felt nervous but made sure to keep his posture straight instead of hunched over. She leaned back in her chair, surprise etched on her face, and applauded him: "Well, David – I certainly didn't expect this," she said in appreciation. "You can take a seat, I am giving you an A."

While walking back to his desk, David observed his classmates. Most of them looked bored, and not present in the moment at all.

"Man, what the hell were you on about?" Koudela bumped into him after the class ended.

"Nothing you could understand," David replied coldly.

"Then explain it to me, you smartarse."

David sighed, but before he could come up with an answer, Petra swooped in next to them with a mocking expression on her face: "Basically he said that everyone is playing games. Like you, for example. You pretend you're so cool, but in reality, you're just a lying bastard."

"Piss off, you bitch," Koudela snapped and walked away.

"Fuck you, you prick!" Petra screamed at his back, before running away from class. There were tears in her eyes.

David turned to Dana, the only other person who was also present for the exchange. "What happened between those two?"

"Petra caught him cheating on her."

"With whom?"

"Dominika. Just wait until the two come across each other again, there's going to be a fight for sure."

"Where's Dominika anyway?"

"No clue. I think she's afraid to show up. It was really interesting what you were saying, about the book I mean."

"Really? I thought no one paid attention."

"I did. Hey, what if we made an agreement? I can help you with Math if you help me out with Literature?"

"Sounds good," David agreed, smiling in surprise.

On his way home, he bumped into Dominika and Petra. They were at each other's throats, trading insults back and forth. Without thinking about it, he stormed in between them. "Oi, Patrick!" he shouted for his friend, who rushed to help him.

"Calm down, Petra," David held her slim shoulders in his hands, trying to keep her from clawing the other girl's eyes out.

"She's a slut!" Petra screamed.

"You're the slut!" Dominika retorted.

This went on for a few more minutes, until David, with the help of the rest of the class, managed to stop the argument and send them both their separate ways.

"Why did you stop them?" Patrick asked him afterwards. "It could have been quite the show."

"I was worried," David said. "I didn't want them to hurt each other."

"Don't tell me you were worried about Dominika."

To his own surprise, David realized that he had been worried about both of them.

Reality

David didn't know much about Dana. She wasn't a part of his friend group and they rarely spoke in class. She was a little shorter than him, with an unruly head of curly hair that she dyed ginger. One thing he did note about her though, was that she was kind. Whenever someone was being mocked by the class bullies, she never joined in and was always there to offer a few words of comfort afterwards. And she would always help people out when they needed it. Ever since they started helping each other with school, he found that he wanted to get to know her better.

She visited David on Sunday when his mom was out for a walk, and Tereza had left to see her friends. "I didn't know you played the guitar," she said as she noticed the new guitar hanging above David's bed.

"Well, yeah," David took it down and passed it to Dana who tried strumming a few chords experimentally. She tried to sing '*Zatímco se koupeš*', but couldn't synchronize the singing and playing. "Here, let me," David took the guitar and began to play. Fortunately, he knew most of Nohavica's songs by both heart and fingers. Dana happily began to sing along. Her strong voice filled the room. She sounded completely different than when she was screaming on the stage with their village band. David stared at her in surprise.

"I had no idea you were so good," he said admiringly, which got him a dazzling smile in return.

“Same to you. What else can you play?”

David played ‘*Comet*’, ‘*Swallow*’, and ‘*I like you*’ for her. Dana didn’t know the last one. She sat closer, their thighs pressed together. He softened his voice during the romantic chorus of the song, whispering more than singing it into Dana’s ear. When he was done she turned to him and, gathering all his courage, he kissed her. She didn’t pull back.

Epilogue: American dream

David is hitting the strings with passion and force, the sound resounding in powerful waves. He's no virtuoso, but given that he didn't know how to play a single chord half a year ago, his progress is admirable. The red-haired girl next to him has a truly impressive vocal range and matches his raw energy perfectly.

The audience is in a trance. All of David's classmates are there; Petra, Koudela, Dominika and Patrick are all staring at the band in awe. His mother and sister are also here. It's the big concert to celebrate the end of the school year, they wouldn't miss it for the world.

I am observing David, seeing him shine. He's changed. Nowadays, he almost never slouches, standing straight and proud, a smile tugging at his mouth instead of a frown. He's told me that he wants to try for the Janáček Academy after graduating high school, and if he keeps his fire, he might manage.

Before the concert started, he paid back the money I lent him for the new guitar. He still works at the retirement home – they are quite satisfied with him from what I hear. He doesn't earn much, barely a hundred crowns per hour, but he says he enjoys it. And he can practice playing the

guitar as a bonus, even though the seniors mostly ask for socialist pop.

His life got in order, and it would almost seem that it reached its peak. It is a sort of peak for sure, and it will go down, and then up, and down again. There will be successes as well as failures. The question is whether he will be able to keep his resolve and try to climb back up after being pushed down. I am hopeful he might.

He hits the string a final time and looks into the audience with a look of triumph. The applause they reward him with is thunderous. I applaud as well. David leans towards the singer and kisses her. Right now he is living in the golden moment of dreams, represented by a non-existing vision of the so-called land of freedom. Illusionary, but still, everything is an illusion in the end. Doesn't matter. At this very moment, David is living his American dream.

Afterwards

The story you've just read is entirely fictional (well, almost). As a work of fiction, it doesn't concern itself with strict realism or psychological accuracy.

It also doesn't dwell on Roland's breaches of work ethics (which certainly occur in his little psychodrama with David's sister, as well as in more subtle instances¹). Fiction demands a bit of drama, after all. But the primary purpose of this story isn't to be dramatic. It's to offer readers some personal development tools. Be aware, none of these tools originated with me. I've borrowed them, primarily from the teachings of the Olde Vechte Foundation, which in turn adopted them from other thinkers, particularly from Werner Erhard. Any mistakes in presenting or explaining these concepts are entirely my own, stemming from my misunderstandings or inability to convey them clearly.

This book was born out of my desire to write a personal development novel, largely inspired by two books from the Arbinger Institute that I found deeply engaging: *Leadership and Self-Deception* and *The Anatomy of Peace*. As someone who loves stories but often struggles to absorb lessons

1 Keep in mind that Roland refers to himself as a coach, not a therapist (despite what one persistent beta reader called him). This means his behavior can be far more unconventional than what you might expect from doctors of human soul.

from self-help and academic texts, I was captivated by how seamlessly these books presented complex ideas through relatable, engaging examples. I hoped to achieve something similar here.

I initially wrote the book in Czech, then translated it into English, making some adjustments to the story along the way. After that, I asked Šárka to turn my awkward English into something more beautiful (or at least readable). However, due to various reasons, I made further changes after her edits. So, any flaws in the language are entirely my responsibility, not hers.

In the end, I hope you've gained something from either the story, the tools, or perhaps both. Thank you for reading.

If you notice any mistakes, have questions, or just want to reach out, feel free to email me at info@czechinspire.eu.

**Personal development fable
about a young delinquent who
was given a second chance.**

No friends, two hundred hours of community service, and an obligation to attend ten sessions with a coach acting as a probation officer. David is definitely not happy about this. Why should he care about some random dude who pretends to know everything?

David won't tolerate this mistreatment and will sabotage it in every way possible.
At least, that's what he believes...

American Dream takes you on the journey of a young boy, mistreated by the world, who begins to understand that his life is his own responsibility. If he wants happiness, he'll have to create it for himself.

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