

THE MIX-UP

JAROSLAV KRÍŽ

He later thought that perhaps all great disasters announced themselves by seemingly unimportant symptoms. At the time, he had been sitting just a little too long in the waiting room of some bureaucratic office, and tried to control his growing irritation. During the time he had been sitting around, stretching, leafing through expensive yet uninteresting magazines, on which the government wasted public funds, several thousand irreplaceable seconds of his life sank to nowhere. Maybe he would have somehow wasted them anyway, but at least he wouldn't have been forced to.

He wondered if he shouldn't knock with emphasis, or better yet perhaps pound on the door of the office but, as though materialized by that thought, a young woman leaned out of the door and asked him to come in. When he sat down across her in a standard visitor's chair, he saw she wasn't really that young. She balanced on that edge between thirty and forty, when an experienced woman can sometimes mobilize all her remaining signs of youth and convert them into a touch of refined, deceptively youthful beauty. He looked at her with appraising admiration, which she must have realized, even though she didn't raise her eyes from the form which was spread before her.

"Everything is alright," she said in a saturated, cultured voice. "Except you made a mistake here."

She pushed the form closer to him and pointed at one box with her nail. The reason why all his attention was not immediately put on high alert was probably the nail, which, in its perfectness, resembled the petal of a flower, and yet by a piece of office dirt lodged behind its edge gave unmistakable testimony to the body to which it was attached. She was forty, maybe more, he thought. Young women now emphasized nonchalant, rejectful hardness. His gaze slipped over her thin, well kept hand, over her bosom, softly enveloped in a cashmir blouse, to her regular face and slight blush which, at that moment, maybe was not just the effect of careful make-up.

"That's quite possible," he said lightly. "I always become inexplicably stupid when filling out forms."

She smiled and, for the first time, looked straight at him. A spark of golden light danced in her brown eyes perhaps hinting that she knew about his admiration and was not rejecting it.

"That happens, especially with the birth certificate number," she said kindly.

"Birth certificate number? Where exactly." I am like an excited teenager, he thought. His eyes skipped around the paper, but all he could see was a thin finger with a pink petal of a nail.

"But I am pointing to it, here," she laughed.

"But I think that is correct."

“Come on,” she pouted playfully. “You wrote 0605, you just switched it.”

He stirred. This happened to him often, not only with numbers.

“When you were born on the 6th of May,” she continued patiently.

“But I was born on the 5th of June,” he interrupted her.

She looked directly at him, and the charm of quiet dialogue, carried on involuntarily with unspoken signals, was gone.

“The 5th of June?,” she asked strictly. “Are you sure?”

“All I can be sure of is when I celebrate my birthday,” he said with embarrassment. “Well, used to celebrate, mostly, when I was a child.”

As was often the case lately, his only certainty was in distant memories. He remembered how once - he could have been about five - he got lost in a game in a field quite far from home and completely forgot about his birthday, to which he had been looking forward several weeks in advance. His older brother went to get him, clearly not happy about the errand. He felt a breath of summer heat from the recollection. But now it was often hot in May too, he realized.

“Do you have any other ID?” she interrupted his thoughts.

“But I gave you my old identification card.”

“Yes, but you know,” she said in a voice in which embarrassment mixed with need to retain authority, “A colleague shredded it by mistake. I am afraid it no longer exists.”

“Then you must have me in the files.”

“In the computer,” she corrected him. “Everything is in the computer now. But the problem is, the computer doesn’t know your birth certificate number.”

“It is just a machine,” he said with understanding.

“It is a machine,” she corrected him, “which makes no mistakes.”

He heard that often these days. The resistance of people against authority of machines, seemingly unsurmountable once, had collapsed as if by touch of magic.

“What about the person who entered the number in?”

He had no idea how it was done, but he thought a human being had to figure in the process somewhere. Then, to disperse tension, he started searching his pockets. He had an insurance card and the yearly tram pass. But on both, the birth certificate number was worn out by long use.

“That won’t help us much,” the woman said unhappily. “You will have to bring your birth certificate.”

He started. Another day at the bureaucrats? But then he saw one advantage in it: he’d see her again. Because of the trouble with the birth certificate number he almost forgot how pretty she was. He wasn’t thinking of any adventure - he just liked to look at her.

“Are you going to be here again?” he asked straight out.

She blushed a little, he saw it clearly now.

“You know I will,” she said a bit starchily.

When he turned around in the door, he caught her looking at him.

It was too late to go back to work, so he set out for home. Of course, the tram line was under construction again. He decided to take the bus, which went approximately in his direction. Transportation was a problem in this city, one which didn’t seem to have a solution: those who purchased cars and hadn’t lost them yet, spent hours in traffic jams; those who preferred public transportation,

suffered comparably long in overcrowded trams, or - just as he did now - embarked on adventurous rides in bypass busses.

When he got off at a random stop, he couldn't recognize anything in the neighbourhood. He stood for a while on a strange street and looked around. From a ground level window, an old woman with a little girl observed him curiously. He thought of asking them for directions, but they seemed to look at him strangely. As usual, shyness convinced him to set out in a random direction instead.

The street at which he soon arrived seemed familiar. When he saw on the opposite corner the sign with its name, he felt a touch of fear. His eyesight wasn't good, but according to the sign, the name of the street was Majerové. The one he lived in the last twenty years was called Meyerova, Meyer street. He had no idea who Meyer was - probably some long forgotten politician, so unimportant that nobody cared. Could they have - suddenly - renamed the street? And this way, too? Strange choice, strange similarity of streets and names. Even - he felt his heart beating - one block away he saw an apartment building almost identical to the one he lived in. The color seemed a little different, the walls a little more chipped. But the number was the same and in a kind of vertigo he ran across the street, and easily unlocked the door with his drawn key. When he later recapitulated the first hours of his disaster over and over again, he was almost sure that he ran up the stairs to the second floor with his head down, and that he avoided looking at the name plate on the door while turning the key in the lock.

"You are home already?" Stella asked. "Do you want a glass too?"

She raised meaningfully a cup containing an ample dose of amber-colored liquid.

"But you never drink," he exclaimed.

"Usually," she corrected him. "Usually never. Sometimes," she looked at him through the glass, "a little."

She articulated so clearly that he disbelieved her a little. He felt a wave of anger rising inside him, but he controlled it. This was Stella, not Jarmila, in whose case this kind of diction was unmistakable preface to an hours-long nightmare, during which, despite of his best resolutions, they both entered all possible stages of humiliation, before she - exhausted, covered with vomit, beaten up - fell asleep like a log on any horizontal surface. Was her name really Jarmila? Suddenly he wasn't sure.

"What is it," Stella interrupted his worried silence.

"I thought of my first wife," he muttered.

"Jesus, I better pour it back."

"You won't make it."

"That's true. The mouth is bigger," she sipped appraisingly from the glass. "And better. Not just for drinking."

He went over to her and kissed her. The alcohol fragrance on her lips was something new.

After dinner, he remembered the damn birth certificate. Thank goodness Stella kept the papers in order. But this time she shook her head.

"Birth certificate? They lost it, remember? You were applying for something."

He looked at her tacitly. He recalled no such thing.

"You just have a piece of paper instead, which is supposed to replace it. Don't tell me you don't know about that."

He watched her in awe as she rummaged through the papers, opening different envelopes and finally handing him a puny piece of paper, folded in half. He opened it with hesitation, and stared at the barely visible, uneven type of a bad typewriter, certifying that he, Mr. Ing. Jaroslav Rohan, born on 06/05/1949, lost his birth certificate. The statement about the paper replacing the lost document was as faded as the stamp and signature. Thank goodness the date is right, he thought sadly - but he wasn't even sure of that anymore. He looked at the array of numbers with a feeling as if they were capable of switching places on their own. Then he folded the paper and put it in his chest pocket. It seemed like a ridiculous weapon against something terrible that was quietly careening toward him.

The next day in the tram, which was back in service, he suddenly started as an arm descended upon his shoulder.

"Hi, Mirek," a man about his age exclaimed. "What a coincidence!"

He stared at him disbelievingly. It wasn't unusual for people to confuse his name - he himself preferred not to say any names, to avoid painful mixups. What was worse was that the face meant nothing to him. Although he was used to people recognizing him before he recognized them, still a familiar likeness usually clawed its way through the, at first unrecognized, features, and the trouble was just in placing it. But this face remained closed to him.

"How those years fly, don't they?" shouted the man into his ear, confidentially grasping his arm. He must have belonged to the majority of people who prefer sleeping in and forgoing morning hygiene and breakfast, thought Rohan. But his attempt at escaping the stinking breath unnoticed only led to an even closer approach of the face.

"Do you remember those pranks," the man laughed, trying to look directly in his face, "the rubber bands," he hicked up laughing, "and also peas..."

"We know each other?" he said with difficulty.

"Look at him. Do we know each other?" the unknown man aped. "Five years in the same bench and he pretends not to know me. Well, I have to get off now," he started. He let his arm go and made his way to the door.

"You are Mirek," he shouted from the stairs. "Don't pretend you are not. I recognized you right away."

The people closest to him turned their heads. It was as if they were condemning him for some kind of treason. He couldn't explain to them that his name was not Mirek, but Jaroslav Rohan and that he never saw the man before. Finally he got off before his stop, just to avoid the unwanted attention.

Because of that, he was a little late for work. He felt an unusual silence around him as he was unlocking his desk, but people were in all kinds of moods lately. But presently the secretary came for him. The boss wanted to see him as soon as he came in. He followed her without a word.

"Jaromír," the boss welcomed him, looking at him over his glasses.

He would like to protest that it's not his name, but it was useless. The boss was one of the people who always confused names and insisted on their mistakes. He muttered some hint at an apology for being late, it was the tram. The boss just waved his hand.

"We need helicopters," he said jovially and exposed his overly perfect teeth. He was always sure to make it clear when he was joking. But then his face dropped in a tragic expression.

“That is not the point,” he said theatrically. “It is about your project, Jaromír.”

With a broad gesture he tossed a fascicle of papers in a dark binder on the table. There was a little label, but he couldn’t read the name from the other side of the desk.

“Project?” Rohan said disbelievingly.

“Yes, project, Jaromír,” the boss shook his finger at him.

He was probably a normal, unpretentious man at heart, who just lacked the gift for communication. Maybe that’s why he often used phrases which a foreigner might have picked up in a dictionary of local slang, and gestures which resembled a ham from some provincial scene. That was why his speeches sounded false, and provoked thoughts of hidden meanings.

“Jaromír,” the boss interrupted his thoughts. “We go way back. One thinks one knows what to expect. But this,” he picked up the fascicle, waved it in the direction of Rohan, and threw it on the desk again, “this I didn’t expect. What can you say about it.”

“I don’t know... what is it, really?”

“That’s what I’m asking you, my friend.” It seemed to be an opportunity for making a big scene. “He doesn’t know,” the boss turned to a non-existent audience. He waited for the imaginary applause to stop, and then continued. “He doesn’t own up to it.”

Something was badly wrong. He hadn’t finished any big project lately, not even started. He, as most people in the firm, was getting only partial tasks now.

“Don’t feel like talking?” the boss continued his theatrical irony. “I am not surprised. But if you sign something, you must stand behind it, right?” He picked up the folder again, holding it for a while at arm’s length. “Look at this. Jaromír Hron. Black on white.”

“But that... is some kind of mistake!”

“That’s what I’m saying! This is not you! That’s what I would expect from... well, it doesn’t matter. Not from you.” The boss shut his eyes tight, drew the corners of his mouth into a tragic mask and shook his head with emphasis. “Need a break?” he yelled suddenly, making Rohan start slightly. “Feel like taking twenty? Having some fun?” He looked at him for a while with theatrical rage, then suddenly switched to an understanding, almost kind expression. “So take a vacation. A week. And return the way you used to be. “There,” he said soothingly and stood up. “Let’s not talk about it anymore.”

Rohan followed him to the door and hazily looked on, as his boss gave instructions for his vacation. When the door closed, he looked at the secretary. She answered with an ambivalent smile of her oval face, which falsely resembled pictures of Madonnas. When distributing mail, she always brushed his shoulder with her side and her face seemed to wonder why he never answered her obvious suggestions. But at the very sound of boss’s voice, Rohan completely disappeared from her horizon, as if he didn’t exist. Here, at the closed doors of the temple, it was probably about half way in between.

“Excuse me, but what is ‘Jaromír Hron’ telling you?” he asked.

She looked at him without expression.

“Is that some new game?” she asked with a hint of a smile.

“No. I am just asking.”

“Excuse me, but what is Jaromír Hron telling you,” she answered uncertainly and then smiled again. “Will you take a vacation?”

“The boss gave an order, didn’t he?” he replied and went to his desk. To me, or Jaromír Hron, whoever that was? He decided not to think about it. He seemed to really need a vacation. He felt as if the floor was inconspicuously receding under his feet, and the walls of the room didn’t have fixed shapes, either. He nodded at several colleagues, who observed him curiously, and left the office.

The best think was to go straight to the ID registry. But then he realized that in the morning he absentmindedly took a different jacket, so the birth certificate, or more precisely its replacement, was left at home. So he had no choice but to undertake the tiring and perhaps adventuresome journey first home, then to the ID office. But the mere thought of taking the same tram by which he just arrived was unbearable. He remembered that nearby they recently reopened a cafe which he used to favor as a student. It was just one block away and surprisingly, they were already open. He went through the familiar revolving door and entered the half-darkness of the cafe. The room was almost empty, only in two dark corners he could sense the silhouettes of some figures. He sat down at a small marble table not far from the window and submerged himself in thought. Now that his feeling of stupor receded, he fully realized the absurdity of the whole situation. Did the boss really confuse him with someone else? With him, anything is apparently possible. But the firm was not large, forty, at most fifty people and Rohan never heard of a Hron. Besides, the secretary came straight for him, and at least she shouldn’t mistake him for someone else. If, of course, she was interested in him. But was it possible that she flirted with everybody, just out of habit? The idea that she could have been flirting with him while totally ignoring his identity filled him with mild nausea.

But the boss, out of vanity, never wore glasses, at least not in front of other people, maybe he was trying to look younger. If he just misread the name on the folder, did it mean he was, in fact, criticizing his, Rohan’s, work? But which one? What was the project business about? Rohan again felt as if the ground under his feet were starting to move. Fortunately, the waiter arrived. He ordered coffee and then, after brief hesitation, a glass of cognac. It would cost a small fortune, but he felt like he needed it. The waiter, who wore, during the whole time, an absent expression, nodded seriously, as if he had been listening to an internal voice.

“Yes, one coffee,” he repeated as he was leaving.

“And cognac. Or brandy,” reminded Rohan behind him. “Esplendido, if you have any.”

It was unclear whether the waiter heard him.

Rohan looked around the cafe. Most of the space was sinking into a brownish haze, through which, in several places, broke glimmering traces of light from the windows. Nearby on the wall he saw some copies of newspapers in old-style bamboo frames. He stood up and went over to look at them. The effort to revive old ambience of the cafe however didn’t reach the newspapers themselves. He chose the one where the amount of text still slightly exceeded pictures, and took it to the table. But when he saw how much more light there was at the window, he stood up again and moved there.

In a while, he saw from the corner of his eye the waiter standing nearby with a tray, on which a little cloud of smoke was rising from a small cup of coffee, looking around uncertainly. When Rohan looked at him, the waiter stepped toward him.

“Have you seen the gentleman who ordered the coffee?”

“But that’s me,” he said with irritation.

“Really?” the waiter measured him strictly. “It was at that table.”

Rohan said that he simply moved, to get more light for reading. The waiter, an elderly thin man with a folded, overly serious face, hesitatingly set the tray next to him, while explaining verbosely that he remembered tables, not faces. So many of them came and went, you know. Rohan was nodding understandingly, just to get rid of him.

The front pages contained the usual mixture of disasters, crimes, various scandals and jabs the politicians threw at each other. Somewhere in the back, behind a stack of advertisements and whole page reports on unimportant events, were shyly hidden a few articles on culture or popular science.

“Identity is an illusion,” said one of the titles. Underneath, in a way simplified to the level of a twelve year old child, a purportedly famous physiologist was answering simple-minded questions of reporters. According to his words, most of the body is water, constantly flowing through - and almost three quarters of the remaining tissue is replaced in a mere three or four months. Even bones and neurons in the brain, once thought permanent throughout life, are apparently being rebuilt constantly. Does it mean that in half a year I am simply not myself anymore, asked a reporter. It depends on what meaning you assign to the word “myself”, was the final answer. Rohan disgustedly put the newspaper away, placed a banknote on the table and left the cafe.

“Be yourself,” commanded a large cell phone advertisement on the empty wall of the house across the street. Rohan turned away and walked toward the tram stop. The tram, surprisingly, came soon and uneventfully took him where it was supposed to. When he looked askance at the street sign, he had a feeling that now it said Maděrova. But the letters seemed to be dissolving, so he decided not to think about it and quickly crossed the street to his apartment building.

When he tried to unlock the door to his apartment, for a long time he couldn’t even insert the key into the lock. The possibility that in this, suddenly uncertain, world even the lock has changed, that he lost even the last certainty, his own apartment, made his heart race. But finally the lock gave way, and from behind the door he could hear a clang of keys hitting the floor. He unlocked the door, picked up the other set of keys and entered the kitchen. On the counter there was a note, written apparently in haste: “I am going to Selec, will be back on the 5th.” And some hieroglyph below it, which one could read as S. To Selec? She probably meant Sedlec, but what did that small town mean to her? She said nothing yesterday. Why the sudden haste, causing her even to leave the key in the door? None of this was like her.

With a feeling of unrest he went to the living room. He reached into the brandy cabinet, but his favorite Esplendido wasn’t there, and instead there was an, almost full, bottle of Fernet. He shook his head. Stella must have got this bottle at some press conference. He couldn’t imagine her actually buying it. He poured himself a glass of the dark brown liquid, smelling of pharmacy, sipped, and shook himself. Then he went to sit in the armchair and involuntarily, as if by some automatism,

pressed the TV remote. One of the educational shows was on, which the public TV station always broadcast when it was certain that nobody was watching.

“So every second, millions of new worlds are born,” a reporter in thick make-up monotonously read a question which someone wrote for her.

“You can say it that way,” a gray-haired gentleman replied with embarrassment. “But they are only very slightly different.”

“And which one are we in?”

“Why in every one, of course, always in a slightly different way.”

“How come we don’t see any of that,” the reporter pretended to be interested.

“We are always all in one particular world, without the ability to perceive any of the others.”

“So I am, for example, here talking to you, but at the same time I am, let’s say, bathing somewhere in the sea?” the redactor perked up.

Rohan missed the answer. For some time already he was disturbed by voices coming from somewhere nearby, and in his mind he cursed again the thin walls of the building. Thanks to them, a person was the unintended participant of even the most intimate scenes of the neighbors. But now he was clearly hearing voices from his own bedroom. Something fell on the floor, and then he heard muffled laughter. Burglars! Rohan froze. Except for the unfinished glass of Fernet, he had no weapon on hand. At that moment the door crack-opened, and first a male, then a female head emerged. Then the young man snuck out of the door, and with a sheepishly respectful expression, walked on his tiptoes through the room and disappeared in the hall. Unbuttoned shirt hanging from the back of his trousers left little doubt of the activity he had been engaging in. Then a visibly older, but still pretty woman appeared. She wore an embarrassedly provocative expression.

“You live here?” she asked without ceremony.

“I believe so. What are you doing here?”

Meanwhile outside, the apartment door clicked quietly. The young man apparently decided not to risk anything.

“Stáňa let me have the key. She didn’t say...”

“Stáňa?” he interrupted.

“Well, she asked me to water her plants.”

He stared at her. He felt as if he had again jumped to a different phase.

“So you decided not to waste any time,” he said ironically. “Did you manage to water all of them?”

“Frankly, no.” She stretched, looking at him. “You interrupted us.”

Is it possible that she is asking him to finish the young man’s job? Is it completely unimportant with whom it is? Rohan, against his will, suddenly felt temptation.

“You are a weakling,” somebody shouted. Rohan turned around and saw a raging face with a large moustache, staring at him from the screen. “You are a nobody, a rotten scoundrel without a face.”

A slide of camera revealed a musketeer’s outfit, then a drawn sword. Rohan turned the TV off. The educational show was apparently over.

“That was not flattering,” the woman grinned and walked toward the hall. Rohan stared behind her, until he heard the door clap. He was alone with a feeling of emptiness and shame.

So Stáňa. Stella for him. Is it even his apartment? Presently he froze, imagining that through some monstrous coincidence, he mistook the street and apartment,

that his key fit, that he invaded someone else's house, drank a stranger's Fernet. Well, that at least could be an extenuating circumstance. Was it really his apartment? He suddenly realized that he barely noticed it for years, and that to his inquisitive eyes, it did look a little strange. He felt as if someone was switching, in quick sequence, two different, yet superficially identical pictures: known - strange - known - strange, around and around. With effort, he picked himself up. He will not succumb to that which only looks like a dark conspiracy, yet is, apparently, just a set of coincidences. With firm step he entered the hall, with a single move opened his closet, felt the jacket and the chest pocket. Thanks god, his fingers found the folded leaflet. He took it out and returned to the room. But when he unfolded it, he saw with his eyes popped out of his head a waving woman's handwriting: "Mirek, you are nuts. Better give it up." And then the waving S., which he saw a while ago. He started to shake slightly, but bit his teeth and tore into the hall. He searched through all jackets, all chest pockets, finding an incredible number of folded leaflets, unfolding them and throwing them away, and when he finally found the one which he was looking for, he almost didn't recognize it: his eyes were burning from streams of sweat, maybe even tears, even though he hadn't cried for decades. He collapsed exhaustedly into the armchair, and downed the rest of the fernet: its bitterness could not exceed that which he felt inside.

Sitting in the tram again, he was studying the first leaflet he found. A proof of Stella's unfaithfulness? But then, what was it doing in his pocket? As he was, deep in thought, folding the paper again, he saw on the back side some numbers written in pencil, which he hadn't noticed before. No doubt, it was his handwriting. He apparently just picked up the leaflet somewhere as he was taking notes. But when? He turned the paper forth and back, and each time when he saw the front side with the strange message, he felt as if someone under the surface of the page was grinning at him. He looked through the window and saw that he was at his stop.

He didn't have to wait long at the ID registry and when he entered the already familiar room, was relieved to see the woman he dealt with before. She didn't seem to have a good day, though, she looked markedly older and also much less attractive. The quiet understanding which clicked between them yesterday simply didn't happen today. She looked at him almost with hostility.

"Do you have the birth certificate?" she asked coldly.

He reached in his pocket and handed her the folded leaflet with a somewhat jumbled explanation, which she didn't seem to listen to. She unfolded the paper and stared at it silently. Then she looked up strictly.

"What is this supposed to mean?" she asked sharply. He rose a little, and with a wave of helpless anger he saw that he gave her the stupid leaflet he was studying in the tram. He apologized confusedly, and handed her the correct one, after examining it thoroughly first. She accepted it reluctantly, as if she was suspecting him of making improper jokes.

"But that," she was saying slowly, as she was deciphering with effort the faded text, "won't help us much."

"It says that this document replaces the birth certificate," he objected. "And at least, it confirms my birth date."

"That's the strange part," the officer replied, while she continued staring at the terse lines, as though she was trying to expose some kind of fraud behind them. Then she put the leaflet aside and faced him directly.

“You are not even in the system,” she said. “Look, I tried it in different ways,” she showed him a paper, apparently torn from the printer. It said:

JAROSLAV ROHAN....49.....0

JAROMÍR ROHAN....49.....1

MIROSLAV ROHAN....49.....2

JAROSLAV NÁHOR....49.....1

JAROSLAV HORÁŇ....49.....5

JAROSLAV HARON....49.....0

and so on, with different, at times wild, variations of his name.

“Here you see the advantage of the computer,” she explained. “It can go through possibilities I would never have thought of. But even with those amazing capabilities, the machine simply didn’t find you. Jaroslav Rohan, born in 1949, as you state, simply doesn’t exist. There is one Jaromír, two Miroslav’s, but then the day and month are wrong.”

She took the paper from his hand, looking at it with pleasure, obviously proud of the work of the computer.

“Only here at the bottom, look,” she said. “It fits.”

With a clouded gaze he looked at the line, which was conspicuously set apart from the others:

JAROMÍR HRON....490506.....Praha 10, Meisnerova 23.

“But that’s not me,” he screamed desperately. “I will not be pushed into a different existence!”

“Calm down,” she rebuked coldly. “I am just saying that the date fits.”

“Whether it fits or not, I am Jaromír Hron.” He checked himself. The whole room started to spin. “No, I am losing it. I am not... I am simply...”. Suddenly he couldn’t remember his name. He breathed heavily and held on to the table, just in order not to succumb to the spinning space everywhere around him. Suddenly the phone rang loudly.

“Yes,” the woman said into the receiver. “Yes, it’s me. What? What happened?” her eyes widened. “No, wait. I’ll be right there.”

She replaced the receiver, looked at him for a while rigidly, then jumped up.

“Something happened,” she said hurriedly. “I have to leave now, I’ll be right back.”

She threw some papers into the desk, then closed and locked the drawer.

“I cannot leave you here alone. Would you be good enough to wait in the waiting room?”

As if in a cloud of haze, he followed her out of the office. He looked on as she twice dropped her keys, before she managed to lock the door. She looked at him with eyes which didn’t see.

“I will be here soon,” she promised as she ran through the corridor to the staircase.

He sat in one of the little armchairs, whose shapes gave false promise of comfort, and stared ahead. He felt again as though he was sinking together with all of his surroundings. After a while - he couldn’t estimate, how long - he couldn’t take it anymore. He jumped up and ran down across the staircase into the street. He looked around helplessly for any kind of entertainment, to pass time before the lady officer returns. After a few steps he saw a store with computers and notebooks a few steps farther. After a little hesitation, he entered. Those things didn’t interest

him much, but it was, in the whole neighborhood, the largest and most colorful store.

He nodded at the clerk, who willingly jumped up behind the counter, and said he was just looking. Then his eyes scanned over a few of the instruments, which all seemed the same, then he returned to the window to decide if he would see the officer, should she return. Then he unvoluntarily turned around, and met the eyes of the clerk, who observed him with suspicion. He would gladly have explained everything, but it seemed like too much confused talk. Also, he couldn't quite admit he was just there to pass time. So he turned to face the computers again. Then it happened.

When he remembered that moment later, it seemed like an explosion, which, in a fraction of a second, tore apart existing reality. Actually, it was a rapid sequence of events: hurried steps behind his back, some screams, then deafening cracks of several gunshots. When he came to from his shock and stupor, the salesman stood before him, aiming a pistol at him.

"Don't even move," he said in a voice jumping with excitement. "And put those hands up."

Rohan moved his lips, but couldn't even make a sound. He raised his hands slowly. Through a mild, bluish haze he saw some four steps away from him a motionless body on the floor, and then still another figure, half twisted up on the sidewalk. Almost immediately a siren sounded and policemen crowded the store.

"This is the second hold-up in a month," the salesman said in a high-pitched, choked voice. "The two pulled a gun on me, so I shot them. This," he pointed his pistol at Rohan, "is their accomplice. He came in first to check the place out."

Before Rohan could say anything, his arms were down, twisted up behind his back, tied up by handcuffs. Someone's hands were rudely searching through his pockets and felt around his body.

"I have nothing to do with it," he managed to say.

"You can tell that to us at the stationhouse," growled the policeman and pushed him toward the door. Then, pressing on the top of his head, he threw him to the back seat of the cruiser. Rohan saw those scenes many times on TV, but he had no idea how humiliating it was.

"Name," one of the policemen at the station barked, after they took off his handcuffs.

"Jaromír Hron," he replied, but immediately caught his head in his hands. "Jesus, no. Jaroslav Rohan."

"So which one, make up your mind."

"My name is Jaroslav Rohan," he said as calmly as he could manage. "I am just confused. They are trying to force the other name on me..."

"That happens among gangsters, doesn't it? Tell us what you know about them."

"But I don't know them at all. I just happened to be in the store when they came."

"The clerk tells another story," the shorter of the policemen said. He sat across Rohan and aimed his bright, expressionless eyes at him. "He says that you came in to stake the place out."

"It may have seemed that way. Actually, I was just..."

“Quit trying to wiggle out,” thundered the taller one, who remained on his feet. “You are their accomplice!”

Rohan started, shaken up by the personal tone even more than by the strength of the voice.

“I was at the government office next door, you can check it out. The officer had to leave...”

In as few words as he could, he explained how things happened. The smaller policeman, who was still looking at him pointedly, grinned.

“A good story. Do you have any ID?” he asked coldly.

“But I was just telling you, I am getting a new one.”

“How convenient, isn’t it. Driver’s license, then,” smiled the policeman.

“I don’t have one. I don’t drive.”

“You don’t drive? I am supposed to believe that? Do you hear that, Honza,” he turned to the standing tall man. “He doesn’t drive.”

“Listen,” the tall man bent down and grabbed him by the shoulder. “Don’t play games with us.”

“I don’t have a car,” Rohan said in an unnaturally thin voice. “I don’t need one, and I can’t afford one. It is not required, I hope.”

“So a tram pass,” the smaller one said mockingly. “Or do you just walk?”

With a trembling hand, Rohan reached into his back pocket, but it was empty. Panicked, he started searching the pockets of his suit. Then he tried to remember the last time he still had his wallet. Definitely in the cafe, when he paid. At home? He was less sure, but he took nothing out of his pockets. He started searching himself again, but to no avail. In a state of highest excitement he jumped up, but the tall man’s hand fell on his shoulder again and threw him back into the chair.

“Don’t start jumping up on us,” he thundered. “What’s your name.”

“Rohan.”

“Rohán?”

“No, Rohan.”

“Where are you from. You have an accent.”

“But that’s nonsense. I was born here, in a Czech family.”

“Do you hear him, the Czech?” the tall man grinned at the short one. “Do you hear how strange his pronunciation is?”

Rohan realized that he only barely managed to control the excitement raging in his head. It may have influenced his pronunciation, but hardly enough to be mistaken for a foreigner.

Later he remembered these moments as a long period of darkness, interrupted by lightning flashes of questions. They interrogated him maybe for hours, time quickly lost its value. They kept coming back and back again to the moment when he entered the store, looked around and then signaled through the window.

“That’s not the way it was,” he repeated exhaustedly. “I already told you, I was looking out for the lady officer.”

Suddenly a younger man in uniform entered the room and handed some kind of leaflet to the fat man. He read through it, then aimed a pair of hard eyes at Rohan.

“So you are just having us on, all this time, huh?” he said in a quiet voice. “You feed us some fairy tale and think how smart you are.”

He stood up and slowly approached Rohan. His small pupils were hypnotically sucking in Rohan’s eyes.

“You are no Rohan,” he yelled suddenly. He jumped on him and grabbed his tie in a way that he started choking. “Who are you! Answer now!”

Rohan repeated his name in a dull voice, his birth date, his residence. Unable to follow his own mechanical voice, he was completely exhausted and taken over by hopelessness.

“Central registry knows noone of that name,” the policeman shouted at him. “You simply don’t exist,” he hurled in his face with a sound of evil laughter.

“There was some kind of mistake,” Rohan said numbly.

“Mistake, huh? The computer makes no mistakes. You are the one making a mistake when you are putting us on. Who are you,” he yelled again.

“Jaromír...,” Rohan heard himself say.

“Who?”

Now two of them were shaking him.

“Jaromír...,” Rohan almost said again, but before he could say Hron, he started screaming unarticulatedly. Then his head went dark and he passed out.

He came to almost right away, but immediately fell again into a confused state when the shapes of rooms and contours of policemen kept fading away and his lips, apparently removed from the central control of his brain, mumbled disjointed sentences. Then he succumbed to a weary state on the border between sleep and awakeness. They probably gave him an injection of some kind, but he couldn’t remember anything later.

He woke up on a bed or stretcher which - as everything around him - felt like hospital. When he turned his head, he saw a man in a white suit and glasses, observing him keenly. Although he was young, his head was bald and several deep wrinkles lined his face.

“Where am I?,” he asked.

“Prison hospital,” the man said quietly, as if he was divulging some grand secret.

“So I am under arrest?” His all life, he associated the word with an uncertain sense of horror.

“You have not been charged yet, it is just preliminary detention,” the man said unwillingly.

“But why,” Rohan rose on the bed. “I didn’t do anything.”

“There is some suspicion. And besides, they say you gave a false name.”

“I told the truth,” Rohan said more loudly than he would have wished.

The man just looked at him.

“They are forcing a new identity on me just because some computer...” He didn’t even feel like finishing the sentence. He felt as if the same scene had been playing itself out over and over again for days.

“But I am I,” he said in a stronger voice again. “I have a right to that.”

“Calm down,” the unknown man pushed him back into horizontal position on the bed.

Lying down, Rohan felt much more defenseless.

“There are some basic rights,” he expressed with difficulty.

The man, apparently a physician or psychologist, smiled.

“Human rights, you mean? Everyone appeals to those,” he added ironically.

He just looked at him for a moment, then the corners of his mouth began to chuckle.

“You know, it is interesting,” he said, “that in all of the thirty articles of the United Nations Declaration, there is no word about a right to identity. We have a right to life, due process, even to education and all kinds of other things, which none of the developed countries even honor, but there is no mention of a right to identity. Probably because you have to be somebody first before you can assert a right of any kind. Without an identity, you are nobody.”

“But that’s absurd,” Rohan stuttered. “How could I not have an identity.”

“You could have more than one, which amounts to the same thing.”

“But that’s not the case!” involuntarily, Rohan started shouting again. “I am I, not another person.”

“Are you sure?”

Rohan stared at him, while his head was whirling with rage and despair.

“Think about it,” the man said and the corner of his mouth chuckled again. “I’ll give you something to calm you down now, you will sleep well afterwards.”

This time, Rohan clearly felt the prick in his arm. Only then he realized that he was wearing some kind of loose white cloths, apparently a hospital gown. The loss of his own cloths, even if temporary, felt like another assault on his identity. He felt a waft of fear, which, however, soon gave way to a warm wave, spreading from his arm throughout his body.

“When you wake up in the morning,” the man flashed his glasses at him, “I hope you finally realize how important it is to have only one identity.”

Rohan wanted to jump up and beat into the other man’s head, by hand if necessary, the message that this was precisely what he was defending, but a warm numbness prevented him from moving. The man was already at the door anyway, and presently closed the door behind him. Rohan numbly stared at the ceiling, and then involuntarily closed his eyes.

In the morning, an employee, perhaps an orderly of some kind brought him a measly breakfast: bad coffee, a rubber roll and a small cube of synthetically tasting butter. Rohan felt as if he had been drinking all night, but he forced himself to eat. He expected a tiring fight, for which he needed energy. But what fight? To defend his identity - the only one, since there can be no other. But that’s what they claimed to ask for too, his only real identity. The trouble was that they didn’t believe his name. Is his own name so important? He thought about it while chewing endlessly the roll, which only unwillingly submitted to his teeth. People do change their names, for example they use a pen name. But his name was a bond to his family, his parents, not living now, but once so real. Also with the date and place of his birth, with that point in spacetime when his life began. Of course he couldn’t remember the very moment of his birth, but it was no less real because of that. His memory was always failing, and he always read with incredible envy the memoirs of some writers, who apparently managed to recollect scenes from their childhood down to the level of most minute detail. He just had flashes of sudden images removed from time, like faded postcards. Suddenly he remembered how once - maybe he was three or even younger - his mother showed him a photograph, according to her, of himself with his brother and parents. Somehow, he couldn’t understand what she meant: he was here, at the table, with her, so how could he be on the picture at the same time, a black and white one with faded brownish tint, on top of that? Did he really remember that scene, or did mother later tell him about it? Was it really himself, the silly little person staring without understanding

at a glossy rectangle with some faces on it? Suddenly he felt that if he put that in doubt, he couldn't be sure of anything. Again he had the feeling as if his bed, together with the whole room around, were sinking into boundless emptiness.

Fortunately, the orderly appeared again and led him to his morning toilette. They didn't entrust him with a razor, but he was allowed to wash himself up a little. His face seemed strange in the mirror, with messed up hair and swollen red eyes, covered with a molded stubble. Isn't his identity in his own likeness? And what if a person loses that? He read somewhere about a kind of crisis people go through after a traffic accident when their face is badly burned. He imagined it. A man without a face. Was it a horror movie? Or a Chinese novel? But he heard that there, if a man lost face, even figuratively, he simply ceased to exist.

"What are you looking at," the employee interrupted him. "If you are done, go to the lavatory."

As he was sitting on the bowl, waiting in vain for his estranged body to act, suddenly it all seemed comical. I push, therefore I am. But even the president, or the psychiatrist with his glasses, sit down in this way. The orderly interrupted him again, maybe he was getting bored. Ashamed, he made a rustling sound with toilet paper and flushed.

They led him to an office where, as he expected, the man in glasses and white suit was waiting, accompanied by an older man, also in glasses and with a goatee, wearing an elegant suit. Rohan uncsciously named the first man Doctor and the other one Counsel, because of his somewhat clumsily authoritative appearance.

"So you are Jaromír Hron," the Doctor said lightly. Rohan felt his tension rise.

"No. I am Jaroslav Rohan," he replied with suppressed anger. "I said it many times before."

"But the name Hron was mentioned," the Doctor objected. "Who is it, then."

"I don't know."

"You don't know? You just made it up?"

"It was apparently a mistake," Rohan said tiredly. "Someone called me that. And then, by coincidence..."

"Continue," the Doctor demanded, "it is quite interesting."

Rohan looked at him with sudden hatred. He felt as if this man was examining him like a bug under the magnifying glass. A moment was filled with tense silence.

"The investigating officer thinks," the Doctor suddenly said, "that Hron is your real name. That you spilled the beans during the interrogation." He got up, walked to the window and looked outside. "But I don't think so."

Rohan looked at him with surprise, with sudden hope. The Doctor turned, took his glasses off and started polishing them with a handkerchief.

"There is a possibility of split personality," he said suddenly. "Sometimes you are Hron, sometimes somebody else."

"And who," Rohan asked mockingly. "Jaroslav Rohan?"

"No, Rohan doesn't exist," the Doctor said and put his glasses on. "A typical substitute personality. An equivalent, understand? Some minds can't take the sudden switch to another personality, so they create something in between, a transition." He took off his glasses again and massaged the thin part of his nose. "Sometimes there are several such transitional personalities, we talk about fugue states. But that won't be your case."

"I see you have it all figured out," Rohan laughed unhappily.

“I don’t expect you to believe me,” the Doctor smiled. “Such processes are almost completely unconscious. Almost,” he repeated. “Not completely.”

Almost completely. Usually never. Where did he hear such oxymorons before? Rohan suddenly felt as if he was in a time warp. What is happening now happened before, and will happen again. Almost certainly. Involuntarily, he grasped at the table.

“Deep inside one personality knows about the other,” the Doctor continued. “You are balancing right on the edge now. You claim to be some Rohan. But it will not last long. Hron is one possibility. We are interested in the other.”

“What is your occupation,” the other man suddenly asked, the one he dubbed Counsel.

“Construction engineer,” Rohan replied with weak hope.

“How important is it to you. Do you identify yourself with your work?” the Doctor interjected with a smooth voice which, to Rohan, seemed dangerous.

“It pays my bills,” Rohan said truthfully.

“Nothing more?”

“I used to have bigger plans, but nothing came of them.”

“What exactly do you do?” the Counsel took over again. “Do you build houses?”

“There is not much new construction going on right now. I work in Inova, a small firm. We do repairs, some remodelling, roofing.”

“They arrested you yesterday afternoon. How come you were not at work?”

“I went to the ID registry. And also,” Rohan remembered suddenly, “I am on vacation.”

“Aha, vacation,” the Doctor interrupted. “You see,” he turned to the other man, “A typical equivalent.”

“What were you doing at work before you went on vacation,” the Counsel ignored him.

“Is it important?” Rohan hesitated.

“I want to know exactly what you were doing.”

How was he supposed to distinguish that particular day from the long array of his daily routine, which was not unpleasant, but which grinded time into an almost homogenous gray mass? Then he suddenly remembered. If this was a test of his identity, it was a little awkward.

“I was designing a ... bathroom. No, I’ll be honest. It was a lavatory. Not very glamorous.”

“But useful.”

“I don’t know. Not really. More of a whim. There are two in the house already.”

The man with the goatie nodded. Then he asked if Rohan had telephone. He told him the number, but then he remembered Stella wouldn’t be home. She said she was leaving, but he forgot when she was supposed to come back.

“We’ll check it out,” the man with the goatie said. Then he called the orderly, who took Rohan back to the cell where he had spent last night.

His hope for a quick release, supported by the demeanor of the, apparently important, man with the goatie, faded fast. Hours passed. Some time during the soundless flutter of time, during which numbness was interrupted by waves of fear, the orderly brought lunch - an undefined meal with disgusting potatoes. His attempts to strike up a conversation failed: he was either completely dumb, or had strict instructions not to talk to the patients-prisoners.

Suppose they asked for more details from his past: what did he do on such and such day, who could corroborate it. He was stricken by panic: months, even years, were deleted from his memory. Could there be some truth to the multiple personality theory, could it be that he didn't remember the periods during which he was someone else? No, that was nonsense, he felt. And suddenly he felt sorry for the segments of life which evaporated without a trace. If he ever got out of this mess, he will start a diary. But even as he was thinking it he realized that he would do no such thing. Although he would not give up his life voluntarily, he was sure his day to day activities were hardly worth recording.

Suddenly two guards appeared and took him back to the room where he was earlier. Doctor was there, this time not at the table, but sitting up in front of a large TV monitor, on which he was changing some settings.

"We'll make a short experiment. I'll show you something," he said over his shoulder. "Sit in this chair and relax. I'll only ask you to listen and try to follow."

Rohan complied. As many times during the past couple of days, he felt as if the whole world was dislocated. It could have been a confused nightmare, if only he could wake up. Meanwhile, the doctor apparently put on a videotape. The screen showed a high mountain range, then a large bird with motionless wings, circling high atop the landscape. Then the camera assumed the vantage point of the bird: the landscape fell into the depth, and dissolved in the endless horizon. The circling added to its smooth, hypnotic rotation. Rohan felt his eyes closing. He forced himself to alertness, because he sensed some sort of refined trap behind this.

But the slow whirl of images didn't stop, only they started to intertwine with one another. To monotone, dull music a quiet, persuasive voice was added.

"To be one's only self, in the bounds of one's selfish ego," the voice said, "seems obvious. But old wisdom knows of mutations and transitions between forms of reality, of deep connections between them, everything is in the particular and the particular is in everything..."

Rohan's attention was slowly fading as he was receding into a state of warm oblivion. Being is an illusion, he heard that before, too. To be oneself, that painful, even frightening project, from which he tried to save himself during childhood, was forced upon him so long that he finally adopted it as his own. Wouldn't it, in the end, be simpler just to dissolve in the endless array of likenesses which he encountered every day on the street. Or simply wave one's hand and give up everything?

"Look here," the Doctor's voice interrupted. He sleepily followed his finger and looked at the blackboard, hung on the opposite wall, on which it was written in chalk: NAHOR VALSORAJ.

"What is that supposed to be?" he asked with irritation.

"Do you know that name?" The Doctor's voice sounded sharply, like a knife.

"That's supposed to be a name?"

"Let's say it is an Albanian terrorist wanted in several countries," the Doctor approached him. "You must have seen that name before."

Rohan stared for a while at the meaningless sequence of letters. Then he was filled with anger.

"Look here, I don't know what kind of stupid game you are playing with me," he said quietly. "You are trying to confuse me and then paint something on me. But

don't you think you'll get away with it. I have my rights and I'll file a complaint against you."

"Aha, he is paranoid, too," the Doctor smiled. "Maybe a paranoid schizophrenic. We have protocols for that, too."

"You are trying to scare me," Rohan retorted, "but there is no use. I am not as stupid as I seem to you. In any case I know that I have my rights!" He shouted the last words in anger so loudly, that he was scared of his own voice.

At that moment, the door opened. Now they'll take me away, probably to the asylum, he thought. But the man with the goatee entered, surveying the situation briefly, then turned to the Doctor.

"That will be enough," he said. "We'll end it. His story checked out. Give him his cloths back and let him go. Right away," he added, when he noticed the Doctor's disagreement. Then he turned to Rohan.

"I must apologize to you," he said dryly. "You know, even we are not immune against mistakes."

Rohan only stared tacitly, but the Doctor didn't seem to give up so easily.

"But he is not in the Central Registry," he half-whispered.

"It was an error," the Counsel said disgustedly. "There were several thousand such disappearances from the registry in the last few days. Probably some damn virus or something. They fixed it and it is working normally again."

In what seemed like a drunken state, Rohan followed him to the next room, took off his hospital gown and put his cloths on. He signed some papers which he didn't understand, then stumbled down the stairs and out onto the street. The woman who stood there looked like - and really was - Stella.

"Finally," she jumped on him and hugged him. "What a night. I called hospitals, the police, everybody, but in vain. Some guy suggested you were drinking or with your mistress. I said OK, but the whole night? At this age?"

"Is it Friday already?" Rohan asked in confusion. "You went to Selec. You were supposed to be back on the fifth. That's not until Friday..."

"What are you blabbering?" she laughed. "What Selec?"

"You left me a note."

"That I am going to SEEC. Don't you remember? South European Energy Corporation, they were having a press conference there. And I said I'd come back around five."

"And what about the woman who was supposed to water the plants?"

"Alena? I heard about that. What a little bitch, isn't she. I keep spare keys at her place in case I lock myself out. I had no idea she was taking advantage of it."

"Why doesn't she party in her own apartment?" Rohan wondered.

"Her husband is jealous, he sometimes checks on her."

Everything had an explanation, Rohan thought. Everything except a tiny little bit that was left over, which he wouldn't soon forget, though, he felt.

When the tram stopped in their neighborhood, he held Stella and pointed at the house across the street.

"Tell me what you see. The name."

"Meyerova, of course, our street. Listen, do you think maybe you need glasses?"

It remains to be said that Rohan got, in due time, his glasses. The correction, the optician said, was small, yet meaningful. He also picked up his new ID card, uneventfully this time, and went back to work on Monday, where he finished the

tiny blueprint for the unneeded toilet. There was no mention of the project or of Jaromír Hron, after all the boss had left for a business trip. Rohan simply slipped back into his usual life like an arm into the sleeve of a well-tailored jacket. Only each time on his way home he looked with slight worry at the sign announcing the name of the street. But since he had his weak, yet meaningful glasses on, it always said Meyerova. For now.