

Misses

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Anna (*1951):

There is nothing wrong with staying single – only my mum is not so proud of me

(...)

(1982–1984)

And then mum decides that she and her younger daughter would go to visit their relatives in Hannover. The Western capitalist world is enemy number one for communist Czechoslovakia, so they have to fill out a lot of applications, beg for a foreign exchange commitment from the national bank, plead the employer to give them a permit, and also contact the military administration and public security... When, finally, the bank condescends to grant the commitment, they must return to the national security corps to apply for an exit permit, and ask the employer and the military administration again for their approval... Having all of that in the bag, they still have to arrange for their visa.

Having all the documents together, they set off on their journey. Anna says goodbye to her dad, grandma, sister, Inka.

The Western world is magnificent. Different from their own country, Czechoslovakia. The engineer enjoys freedom she has never known and abundance that is not accessible back home. Maybe she starts dreaming a bit – how about staying here? Oh, no, the whole family is back there.

But as the holiday draws to an end, suddenly mum becomes sick and has to go to hospital urgently.

“The operation has been successful, your mother will be all right,” the doctors comfort nervous Anna.

“And when is she going to be discharged?”

“Unfortunately, she will have to spend several weeks here. Her condition will not allow her to be transported to Czechoslovakia.”

“But our permit to leave the country is going to expire in a few days!” the daughter is worried.

The doctor helplessly shrugs his shoulders.

Anna goes to see her mum: “I’m not going to leave you,” she decides. “I’ll stay here until you are able to come home with me.”

But the days pass quickly and their stay extends – which comrades in Czechoslovakia don't like. They approve the extension of Anna's mum's stay, but not hers. Despite this, Anna refuses to leave her mum alone in Hannover.

And then the dad calls: "You know, Anna, you've been fired from the steel works. 'Cause you haven't appeared for a long time. You were given leave for half of March and it's April now. You haven't come to work for six weeks now..."

The young engineer gets scared: "What now?"

Though the doctors issue a certificate to the foreigner that her mum needs to be accompanied, she is scared to return now:

"What if they put me in jail?!"

"Now you don't have any other option than to stay here," her cousin advises her.

"But I can't speak German properly! My German is good just for travelling, it won't do,"

Anna starts panicking.

"Moreover, I studied at a technical school and wish to continue working in the construction sector because I like it. How will I make it in the field here, in Germany?"

(...)

During her flight to Berlin, Anna cries all the way: "What will be waiting there for me?" she loses hope.

It's May and Berlin is in full blossom. The young woman clenches her suitcase containing just a few pieces of winter clothes, a dressing gown and a fur coat. She and her mum came to Germany in March and now it is almost summer. Anna is so stressed that during a few weeks her weight drops to 43 kilo only and keeps dropping.

From the airport, Anna takes the shortest road to Heim, a refugee home. They already know about her. Anna's cousin from Hannover called them before sending her there. Anna's family from her mum's side is purely German, so there should not be any problems about accepting her. If it were not for a cottage in Czechoslovakia, her mum may have been living in Germany for a long time.

Since West Berlin is divided into three sectors among the British, Americans and French, she has to walk the carpet in all of them.

"Where do you come from?"

"Why did you come?"

Always the same kinds of questions. They are scared of whether this engineer is not a communist agent.

They are surprised by Anna's fluent German, even though she herself has doubts about it. But private lessons during her studies at the grammar school and lessons at the university are finally put to good use. She clutches a little grammar school dictionary in her hands.

I always have it with me, it is my companion wherever I go. I've glued it together many times and I won't hear a word against it. It became my most valued possession during my escape.

"Well, you can stay here in Berlin," Anna is finally told. But she can't say she feels relieved.

She's given a plastic washing-up bowl, soap and a towel. The cooks are Polish and Anna does not like their food very much. She shares a room with a pensioner from East Berlin and a Romanian woman of the same age. The Romanian knows absolutely no German, so the Czech woman speaks broken Russian with her. Both of them keep crying all the time. Meanwhile, the East German lady is sitting pretty. She already lives unofficially at her sister's in West Berlin and visits the refugee home only every second day to pick up her mail.

"Come on, girls, crying again?" she always asks them.

They sadly nod their heads.

"For God sake, stop that. You have no idea yet how well off you'll be here!"

Anna sighs: "Sure, she's arranging for her to get her pension soon, so she's fine already. As an East German, she's accepted well in Berlin. But us?"

The pensioner gives the emigrants a piece of advice: "Girls, your whole life is ahead of you, you just need to take it in your hands!"

And I did take it later on. Even though I would spend many more nights crying.

Markéta (*1965):

Emancipated bitchy women don't have it easy either

(...)

(1985–1988)

For her, their relationship is an absolute priority.

"I'm able to cancel, postpone or rearrange anything for him. Just to be with him," she admits.

Marek takes the initiative in proposing their rendezvous because she, having no family commitments, is able to accommodate more easily.

She just tries that out: "Hey, I'll be free over the week, can we see each other?"

Sometimes she is lucky that her beloved can arrange it but their dates depend mostly on his free time and his family's arrangements. Saturdays and Sundays are out of question, he is expected to stay at home.

Markéta understands that. She has to forget about their Christmas together and two-week holidays by the sea. That is a taboo.

At first, the young mistress regrets it a lot. She deludes herself that nothing is going on, that it is all right, that she can take it easy. But inside her, it hurts. She has to accept the fact that both of them have their own lives; there is no other option of dealing with it. He spends his holidays with his family, she travels by herself or with her friends. Sometimes he sends her a postcard, while she can't do the same.

She is pleased that he always remembers her birthday. He always calls, brings her a rose and wishes her a happy birthday. But he can't attend a party with her friends.

I saw the world from a completely different perspective than the girls of the same age. Their worries revolved around problems, such as: Will we get married? Will we not? Do we have to? Can we afford it? Where will we stay? Where will we get money for our wedding? What job will we find? Meanwhile, me and Marek, we used to go dancing... I was terribly impressed with him! Compared to my male friends of the same age he was someone, he already had a certain position. Yes, I was comparing him with them. I found my peers so dull. A twenty-year-old boy can't hold a candle to a thirty-three-year-old man who already knows what he wants, and who has achieved something. Moreover, he was devilishly handsome and had great charisma – and still has it! My classmates were buying Pionýr motorbikes; some of them could not even afford that. He had a car and drove me around in it. My friends were going to dance parties and when I had to choose whether I would join them or excuse myself on the pretext of something, vanish into thin air and then spend a night or, at least, a couple of hours with my lover, I always chose him. He used to take me to places where boys of my age would have never taken me. I was twenty and this kind of life appealed to me very much.

(...)

The love relationship has an uplifting effect on her. She enjoys having such an exceptional lover. It is he who bucks her up to learn manners, to obtain a perspective of seeing herself – seeing her look, her way of walking, her way of acting, her way of enjoying herself, the words she uses, her hairstyle, her way of dressing up, her way of thinking. She owes a lot of things to him.

"This doesn't suit you," Marek says to his young girlfriend. And the skirt subject to his criticism is immediately thrown to the bottom of the wardrobe and Markéta will never wear it again.

"Maybe I'm under his influence too much but I don't think that his influence is bad. I'm no longer a silly village girl who comes to the city to gape at it. It's true, since I met him, I've changed. And it's possible that he moulded me in his own image. Anyway, I'm more self-confident now and won't let anyone to push or kick me around."

Eliška (*1925):

Wahre Freundschaft soll nicht wanken

(...)

(1945)

And the war is over. Josef, who has been held in captivity, applied a long time ago for his release home. But he didn't say a word about it to Alois. Only on the point of leaving, he sees him to say goodbye: "I'm leaving for home. And when I arrive there, I'll get married immediately."

Perhaps he told him he was thinking of Elza.

"Come on, don't do this to me," Alois replies.

Who knows what ideas Josef may have put in Alois' head about Elza?

She is leaving the station. Is she dreaming – is it Josef or not?

She can't recognize him but he greets her. They chat, Elza asks about Alois.

Disappointment – he was not even able to extend his greetings to her. And then he left.

Perhaps to America, perhaps to Australia, perhaps to Canada. Several years later he finds a Polish girlfriend and Elza will never see him again. He will not visit communist Czechoslovakia as an emigrant any more.

She feels anxious: "And he wouldn't even come to say goodbye to me? That's quite sad that he wouldn't even send greetings to his girlfriend when he's leaving so far."

Elza still believes he may return one day.

Josef terribly wants this beautiful, slim girl. As an orphan he desires to have his new home and family. When he comes to Elza's parents' place for lunch, he always complains: "If only I could say that this is my home."

But she cannot forget about Alois. She keeps his letters her whole life. Only at the very end she will destroy them. To avoid shame when they start rummaging through her belongings after her death.

Even if Josef had wanted, I couldn't have married him. I would have felt sorry for Alois – I couldn't do that to him. I felt more affection for him than for Josef. I couldn't betray him. Both of them were good chaps. Alois was older, Josef was a good-looking guy. When Josef was standing in the church, you could have seen his figure from far. He was a handsome devil. But I couldn't do it. I would have regretted it. I didn't want to betray one or the other. I never got in touch with Alois again; he didn't return home, I took it hard. He didn't want to return. Maybe he felt sorry for what he heard from Josef when he was leaving. At least Josef said that he had told him something. But I don't know whether he hinted at whom he wanted to marry. I didn't ask. And Alois supposedly said: Don't do this to me. Maybe he had thought he would come back, but then Josef sent him a letter later on and, maybe, lied to him; that may be the reason why he never came back. But at least I was friends with both of them once; we used to go to church together. During the

Resurrection, when there was a procession through the tree lanes in the village, they served there as altar boys. Of course, boys were looking at girls. But only looking. And laughing. Now everyone speaks only about sex. But such a word didn't even exist then. Throughout my whole life I told myself that I couldn't do this to Alois; I couldn't marry his brother. I never tried to find anybody else after that.

Mirka (*1959):

Time is merciful

(...)

(2008)

And she just tells herself: "All right, Mirka, don't push it; be glad that your parents are still in relatively good health, nothing else is important now," when a Hollywood style love affair is ahead of her.

Tomáš is twenty years younger.

And, as usually, her colleague is involved in it. Lenka. She gently teases the brunette:

"Why don't you and Tomáš get together?"

"Are you crazy?" Mirka taps her forehead with a finger. "Do you know how old he is?"

"And are you prudish?" Lenka asks.

"I'm not, no way..."

And so they start going out in May and go for holidays in the summer.

So, hopefully, this is the time of my life and I met the right man, after all those years. Probably I was supposed to wait for him. I really love Tomáš a lot. I know that our relationship is not permanent but I wish so much so that it will last as long as possible. I won't struggle with life. When Tomáš feels that he wants to have a family or desires to have a younger woman, I will not make a scene.

Marcela (*1935):

To live in a couple is the biggest repentance

(...)

(1948)

Half a year later, missionaries come to Hradec to give a lecture for girls.

"You should go to hear it," Marcela's parents say to her.

"Mum, please, what can a priest tell me about life? I already know everything!" she boasts.

But finally she arranges with some other girls to go to the talk.

Marcela is oblivious to what the talk is about. But on her way home her life changes.

At the edge of Malšovice village stands a cross, and as she passes it, she feels as if she were struck by lightning. Suddenly she hears a voice: "You will serve me as a nun!" Marcela is puzzled at it: "Oh no, good Lord, that must be a mistake. I know all the boys from Hradec and I've ranked them all according to how much I like them. You must have mistaken me for someone else..."

But she stands rooted to the spot – the voice scared her quite a bit. After five minutes of resistance, she says quietly: "All right then, I will try it but can't guarantee the results."

Marcela suddenly feels a huge commitment. She was addressed by God at age thirteen. That is clear. And now she has to fully devote herself to religious life.

But how to do it? She is still a teenager and is afraid to make a confession at home that she needs to go to mass every day before school. She is scared that if her parents find out that she takes communion every day, they would mock her, saying: "Come on – you, such a sinner!"

And how about her grandma?! She contributed nicely to her granddaughter's life. She wanted to teach her humility but in a rough way: "You are a child begot only after much prayer. And such children are always good for nothing..."

(...)

(1957–1962)

So, when her class graduates in May, she finds a note on a desk in the staffroom: "You have been dismissed." Suddenly everybody walks on tiptoes around her. The reason for her notice? Supposedly better placement of the cadres.

Marcela suspects what is going on... Her friend from the Děčín group used to help the nuns with translations of documents from Germany. Unfortunately, one of the girls in the congregation was a pickpocket and when she got busted, she started telling the cops that the group was pursuing anti-state activities.

"Report to the regional national committee, we have an issue to discuss with you," says the letter she received. But Marcela throws it away: "Why should I go anywhere, I live in Litoměřice."

But later on when she leaves her house in the morning, a car stops on the corner, a bloke gets out and comes up to her: "Get in!"

"No way, I don't take rides with strangers," Marcela protests.

But the bloke opens his lapel and shows her his badge.

Marcela feels like fighting with the cop until the blood is drawn so that she does not have to go anywhere: "My eyesight is poor, maybe it's just a penny coin that you have in your lapel, I'm sorry!"

People start gathering close to them.

"Get in immediately! Otherwise we won't be nice to you!" the bloke screams.

Marcela steps into the car thoughtlessly. A thousand thoughts run through her head:

"Jesus, my folks have no idea where I am! They think I'm on my way to Ústí while they're taking me in for questioning!"

He drops her off at a former Jesuit college next to the St. Wenceslas church where the secret police have their headquarters.

(...)

(2011)

Marcela is pleased that Hradec's priests take care of Mr. Otčenášek. Every day they serve the Holy Mass with him. He starts forgetting how to proceed ... He is at the table by himself, only one priest joins him to guide him.

His loyal friend is moved to tears, she suddenly runs away from the Holy Mass. Later on, everyone wonders: "How come you didn't stay until the end?"

Marcela starts stammering: "You know, I would have really started crying when I saw him so helpless. Don't want that from me."

Marcela had a habit of saying goodbye to father bishop in a special way. She would make a cross on his hand and he would do the same on her forehead. It is mid-May when she goes home, leans over his bed and says: "And how about a cross?" And he stretches out his arm, trying with all his strength to raise it, just to make a blessing on her forehead.

"Sister, only now I can see what all you have protected me from," he thanks to Marcela, deeply touched.

The nun's voice is shaking: "Bishop, it is I who owe you much because you introduced me to the church elite. I was just an ordinary girl, a mere schoolmaster, and you brought me into such society!"

On the morning on the twenty-third of May she visits the bishop again. In the evening he dies.

It was terribly sad for me; after all, I spent almost my whole life with him! But when he died I knew that he had fulfilled his task.

In the chapel a requiem is being prepared and Otčenášek's body is displayed in a coffin there. Marcela is in tears. Then she goes home, to the flat that the Bishop personally consecrated at her request, and served a mass in there when she was moving in so that she would enjoy staying there.

Tears rush to her eyes.

"I should pray again," she tells herself.

She takes a breviary, opens it and reads the words from the Gospel that she glanced at.

"If you loved me, you will rejoice because I'm going back to my Father."

Lída (*1963):

Marriages are entered in heaven

(...)

(1981)

It's Lída's eighteenth birthday and her folks are waiting for her at home with a cake. The student is in a rush; she's used to hitchhiking back home from her school in Lovosice but today she has been stuck on the spot for ages. And so when a car stops with a strange driver, she suppresses her sixth sense and steps inside. In her thoughts she says to herself: "Hopefully he just looks somewhat fishy..." But the bloke starts saying silly things as soon as Lída's getting in.

In Lovosice there are underpasses under the track behind the petrol station and he immediately turns in there. It's September and it is cold, Lída is carrying a big school bag and she is packed in a big coat – therefore she cannot move much. The driver starts groping her and she can't defend herself.

For the first time I realised how strong men are.

When the raped girl manages to free her hands, she thrusts her fingers to the deviant's eyes and pushes them as far as possible, into the very inside of his skull. She does not care if he goes blind. She does not look left or right, grabs her clothes and rushes to the highway. She is about to run all the way from Lovosice to Ústí, being absolutely off her head.

Fortunately, her dad's friend, a truck driver, stops. The shocked girl cries and does not want to get into his car. He immediately understands what has happened: "I'll take you to the police station."

Lída cries: "I want to go home, home!"

At home she throws herself on the bed and does not want to talk to anybody. Finally, her dad gets her confession about the rape out of her: "We are going to the station."

His step-daughter stops him: "I don't want to go anywhere! I don't want to discuss anything!"

"What kind of guy was that?!"

Lída remembers several digits of the number plate from Kladno and tells it to her father who gives it to his colleagues, truck drivers. If they find him, they will cut him to pieces

on the spot. The deviant was obviously picking up girls coming back from dorms and boarding schools at the end of the week.

(...)

(1989)

The revolution. Lida just drinks and sleeps through the whole thing in the Srdíčko pub. It's their school reunion and when she awakes in the morning, having slept off the previous day's revelry, all of Ústí is full of flags. Sober, she doesn't understand what is going on.

First of all – with my education from the political school, I could have wiped my bottom. Even though I continued my studies at the Philosophical Faculty of the Charles University, I was lost.

"Marxist! Leninist!" they shout at her during the revolution.

"Well, yes!" Lida shrugs her shoulders.

Her step-father wants to hang her up on a lamp post. Great. Her mum has to jump in between them, otherwise they would have a fight. Dad, the ex-boxer, could have killed her.

It will take some time before the rough edges are smoothed off and they start a good relationship again.

Lidie (*1933):

The path of least resistance

(...)

(1978)

She's got a lump in her breast.

Her first feelings are terrible. Despite being a doctor, she irrationally convinces herself that it's nothing serious. After all, she's only forty-five...

She examines her breast every day. She knows it's going to be cancer. But she believes in miracles. At one moment it seems that the lump has disappeared, it feels smaller. But then it reappears – Lidia finds it with her fingers, totally scared.

She touches it every day.

For a whole year.

She's afraid of life, but not of hers: "I don't want to leave my mother alone."

She doesn't think about herself at all.

"Go see the doctor! Don't wait! Why do you keep postponing it?" her subordinate nurse sends her to hospital.

The doctor hesitates. Why? She's paralyzed with fear. Sometimes it's better not to know the truth. At least for the moment. Instead she goes on holiday.

She keeps waiting. The lump keeps growing fast.

"Maybe it's just a benign cyst," she lies to herself.

After a year she finally goes to the surgery department. Suddenly, waiting for the truth smothers her and she cannot stand it anymore. At first, they take a sample.

Positive.

She's overwhelmed with fear.

She has to go for surgery. Immediately. What's going to happen?

Her whole breast has been removed.

The post-operational awakening hurts.

"How are you feeling?" her cousin asks.

"Terribly," Lidie cries.

The worst problem is the strain on her self-confidence.

But even the psychological pain slowly disappears.

One can get used to anything. Life has to be taken as it is.

"I'm alive."

Her faith in God holds her afloat. Her mother cannot offer her much support, being deeply stricken by her daughter's disease. Her fear paralyses Lidia.

Renata (*1974):

As if people were not taking me seriously

(...)

(1980–1983)

But then Renata is supposed to paint the Aurora with Lenin on the occasion of the Great October Socialist Revolution. It ends up a big scandal to be resolved by the school authorities – she brings home a reprimand from the headmaster.

"What is it this time?" her mum pulls out the cane but her daughter whines: "Mum, it wasn't my fault! We were supposed to paint Vladimir Illyich next to the ship..."

Mum opens Renata's pupil record book: "She disparages Comrade Lenin, painting his caricature in the art lesson."

The woman gets sweaty: "What's a caricature?"

She has never heard that word. Instead she pours a little water into her cup, drinks it and then hides the cane without using it.

"Go to bed," she sends the girl to sleep and then spends the whole night looking for a paper from the pedagogical-psychological centre.

"A dysgraphic person is not able to paint basic shapes, such as a circle, rectangle or a square," she reads out loud. First thing in the morning she rushes to see the director to avoid having a bigger problem with regards to Renata's picture.

In the end, the director expunges the reprimand.

(...)

(2005–2009)

The next day Renata and Tomáš go for a hike but they stay longer than planned.

"Let's call your parents from your mobile, they'll be worried. I don't have a phone with me," Renata suggests to her partner.

He would just snort at her: "Come on!"

"So, at least, let's call the cottage, how about that?"

"No", he insists.

She shrugs her shoulders: "All right, I'll leave it to you; you are the master of the world."

But his mum is waiting in front of the cottage, enraged: "Where have you been?" she yells at her son.

He didn't even blush: "She forbade me to call you."

Renata is petrified.

"Bastard who's scared of his mum!" runs through her head. And then she looks at her boyfriend: "This is going nowhere. You lied and, moreover, you betrayed me, I'm not going for it."

Tomáš does not mind. He packs his things and moves to his parents' room.

Renata shrugs her shoulders: "And what?"

Angry and disgusted, she doesn't even mind hiking in the mountains by herself. She can climb up the Jastrabí tower where Tomáš would not be able to drag himself anyway, and enjoys the rest of her holiday by herself. She is not as incapable as her ex-boyfriend.

Maybe I radiate too much self-reliance. Some men don't like it when women are able to take care of themselves. But I'm nowhere near as strong as I look. I only pretend to be strong, having a hard outside shell.

Tomáš's mother cannot refrain from making embarrassing comments about her son's ex-girlfriend which she says loudly so that she can hear them: "She's so dull, anyway, be happy..."