

American Dream

Vojtěch Žák



American Dream

Vojtěch Žák

American Dream

© Vojtěch Žák, 2024

www.scriptor.cz

Translation: Šárka Procházková

Graphic cover design: Vojtěch Žák

Typographic layout: Vojtěch Žák

Cooperated: Stephania Pasare

Published by:

INspire, Příkop 843/4, Zábřovice,

602 00 Brno, Czech Republic,

email: info@czechinspire.eu

Electronic book, PDF

First edition, 2024

Pages: 196

ISBN 978-80-909359-0-7

Contents

Session 0. Establishing the rules	7
Reality	18
Session 1. Get a picture	25
Reality	33
Session 2. Confrontation	35
Still session 2. Theory	43
Reality	56
Session 3. Image	64
Session 4. Victim/Accountable Chart	86
Still session 4 / Reality	101
Session 5: Accepting reality	106
Reality	116
Session 6: Being	119
Reality	130
Session 7: Circle of Creativity	132
Reality	146
Session 8: Success Chart	149
Reality	162
Session 9: What works, what doesn't work	167
Reality	171
Session 10: Courage	174
Reality	179
Reality	184
Epilogue: American dream	186
Afterwards	188

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 Šilinovo 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.

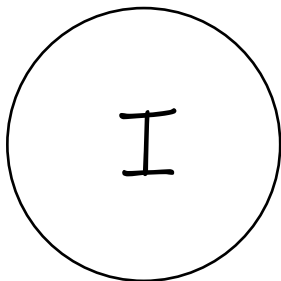
“Thanks,” David said and put the book in his bag. Then, he looked at Deyl. “What happens now?”

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.”

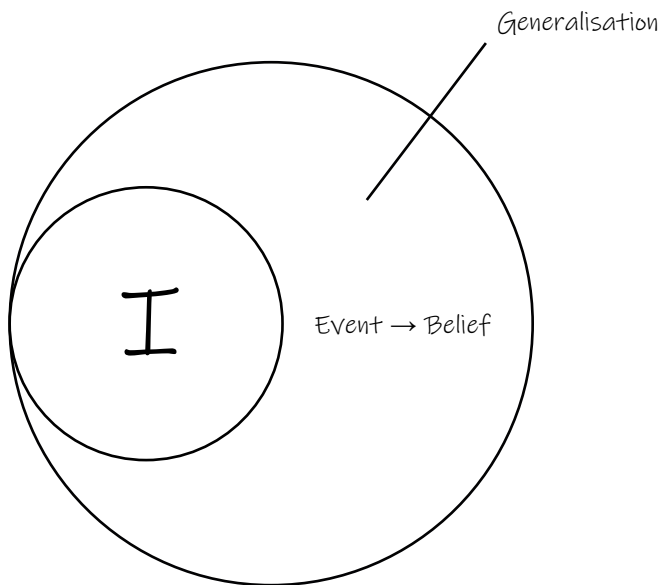
What a strange statement, David thought, and asked: “Fire doesn’t always burn?”

“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.

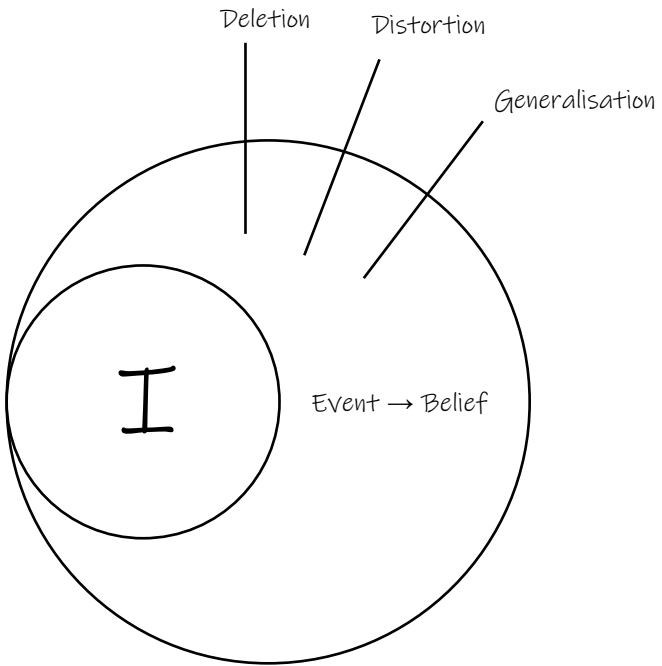
“Really? Haven’t you ever thought in a similar way?”

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.

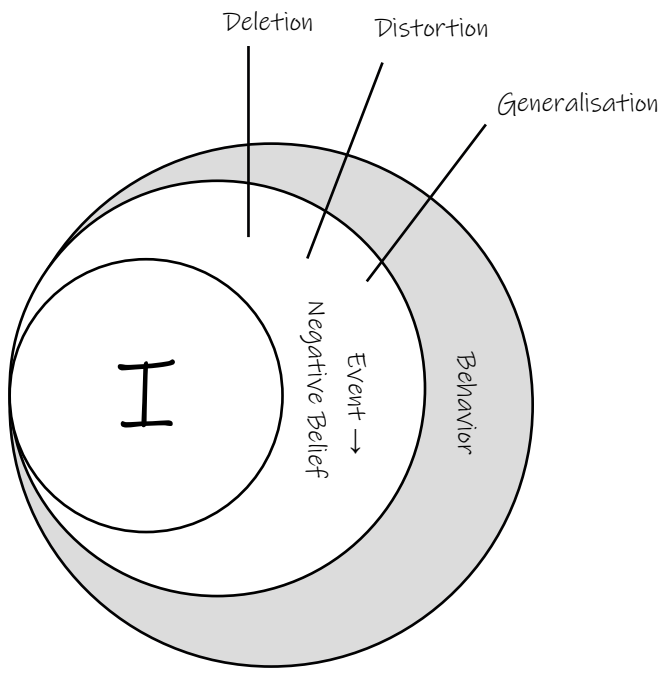
"What I'm going to say now is only my assumption," Roland emphasized. "My own distortion, when I will be putting together things which don't have to be related. My assumption is that you have a lot of negative beliefs about yourself and the world around you. I want to show you that all you are doing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