

# Sample translation

## Jan Faktor: George's Worries about the Past, or Under the Protectorate of the Holy Scrotum-Ding-Dong of Prague

A Novel

Translated from the German by Anonymous.

Revised by Mitch Cohen

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## **we lived without suffering much from the adhesive tape**

I first started worrying about my penis about fifty years ago in kindergarten – back then, it was purely a matter of hygiene. When I sat and peed, I abhorred the idea that the tip of my penis might touch the toilet seat or – worse – the inside of the bowl, so I would reach between my thighs and push the thing straight down. That way I also kept the stream of piss from wetting my pulled-down pants through the gap under the toilet seat.

– What are you doing in there? asked the teachers, who often patrolled the refuges of the rebellious.

– Nothing, nothing special.

Apparently I was able to move my lips and lower jaw at that particular moment. My mouth was taped shut only on the days when I blabbed without interruption and could not be stopped any other way. The teachers always licked the paper tape liberally, and I had to keep my mouth shut tightly to protect my moist lips from their globby spittle. Soon I felt the tape drying, contracting, and pulling my mouth tighter and smaller. I ought to mention: We – kids as well as grown-ups – lived in Prague in a totalitarian society, without suffering much from it.

When I look at my penis today and concentrate briefly, my immediate feeling is that it is an aesthetic form. It looks beautiful, many details of its head even strike me as stunning. But it was a long time before I discovered its aesthetics: about a decade after its coming of age, some thirteen years after its late circumcision, which my mother could no longer follow at close range, no longer lovingly attend. My mother bathed and cared for me in my childhood with great ardor, always beaming intensely as if she had just given birth to me. It didn't bother her at all that I grew taller and there was ever more of me to be cleaned and cared for. Only the intervention of the strict central committee of my aunts kept my mother from continuing – and I could have presented myself today as still dependent on maternal care.

As you can imagine from this bit of information, I was Mother's only child. But that's not the whole truth: I was surrounded by several motherly beings to choose from and did not totally depend on my mother. She was often absent as a caregiver anyhow. But she loved me despite her recurrent depressions and despite my being a

brat about everything, and I later tried to pass on her love by all available means. And I had what it takes. I still wonder why, unlike my penis, my scrotum with its invisible and mysterious semen laboratory never struck me as especially beautiful. What makes my balls look so pale in competition with No. 1 is, of course, their lack of orgasmic ability. Of course that's also true for the most beautiful eyelids; no matter how fast you flick them, they provide no ultimate pleasure.

My later worries about my penis were mostly about storing it suitably; that was uppermost in my mind, overshadowed my daily life, and often made me look like a drooling idiot. Luckily, I was soon able to cast my eyes on the first concrete object of my desires. When Dana stayed the night at our place once, she wore a rather translucent nightie. I didn't notice that in the evening, but experienced it all the more intensely the next morning. Dana came out of what we called the guestroom, the indirect sunlight illuminating her obliquely, and I clearly saw her stiff nipples and her dark bush. From that moment on it was clear that I wanted to arrive at those very points one day. Dana was a charmingly dainty creature. The problem was that she was much older than me. She was over forty, and I was sixteen. On top of that, she was best friends with one of my aunts, and of course a friend of my mother's too.

For many years of my life, most of what I experienced was so embarrassing and unbearable that I was glad never to have to experience it again. No matter how happy I was now and again during my childhood and youth, the circumstances of my upbringing generally seemed horrible. Unfortunately, these feelings did not diminish with time, they accumulated and became deformed, squeezed together beyond all recognition. To be on the safe side, I accustomed myself to despising my grotesque family and myself. I saw us as if from outside through glass, I saw us as if through a wall of cold water. My gaze cooled more and more with every new, naturally often low-quality refraction. In our apartment there were a number of murky mirrors for these sorts of looks. I smashed the largest of them in a fit of rage.

This process of constant denigration left deep fissures and imprints in me. And because I practiced this sort of self-abasement consistently, my disgust threatened to fill me up completely someday. They made me almost hopelessly withdrawn. At especially bad core times, my past left me so speechless that I didn't even dare to murmur incomprehensibly. I could only marvel silently – at myself and everything

else outside of me. But even in better times, I preferred to hold my tongue when concrete statements were demanded of me.

– How are you feeling?

– Eh? Hm.

All this has changed completely. My name is George, my problems speaking about myself and my past are gone forever. Oddly enough, even in the worst periods of my life and despite constant torments, I never doubted that a bright future awaited me. That made it a lot easier for me to vegetate. With my unswerving faith in the future, I had few worries about the present; they were almost exclusively about my past. I always shivered when I reminisced. When I thought about what I'd just left behind, what nonsense I'd spouted here and there, I suffered like a mutilated lab animal. My preoccupation with the past was also so tormenting for me because I liked to obsess about everything that could have gone brutally wrong in my life, everything that could have turned out even worse than it did. So I was really horrified only by my onerous prehistory – no matter how realistically or estranged through fear I retained it in me. I was used to the everyday abysses, on the other hand. Besides, I was actively occupied with my current, even if often abundantly abysmal, morass; its tenacious stickiness had made me strong, and I could watch in passing how I came ever closer to my postponed happiness.

When in connection with my past I use words that have to do with “thinking” or “reflecting,” that doesn't mean that I really reflected about myself. The most I was capable of was a dull brooding. In our home, out of consideration, we didn't often come verbally too close to each other or ask questions and demand answers with a loaded mouth. To avoid all temptation to impose on each other's psyches, even the cleverer members of our family preferred not to think about themselves; and for lack of practice, none of us actually could. In the middle of the cramped domestic togetherness, one of us could really feel like a clearly defined individual anyway; we specialized and reduced ourselves functionally, like bees or ants. So my thoughtless young brain held much unused capacity – maybe that's why my sense of smell is so doggishly hypertrophied. I didn't learn that you can reveal secrets from the underbelly of the soul till I was twenty-six.

As for reflecting, I didn't have any models, any possibilities of imitation or friction; I also lacked material. I searched for nothing, I memorized nothing – as a

result, I knew almost nothing at all about myself. When my later wife confronted me with the simplest emotional questions and wanted clear answers, her insistence felt like a bold attempt to pry open my chest up to my neck, so as to kindle my brain from below.

Very early in my childhood I discovered the magic of my broad smile. I can still remember the stressful situation in which my trick first worked. The living room was full of people, a widely branched family entirely unfamiliar to me had come to visit. I was tiny but still had to confront head-on this vast gathering of souls and submit to the test of a doubled number of eyes. Many mouths grinned at me, nostrils flared, the air was full of lung vapors. And each of these bodies was heating the room up, everyone was blazing like a 100-watt bulb. I decided to smile broadly. I came, I smiled, I conquered. I won despite my profound anxiety and was astonished at how simple it was. Everyone was delighted with me. Other children could only grin tensely in such situations, but I crafted a nature-identical facial product. I didn't have to say a word, my smile said it all: I was a happy child from a happy family, and I was doing well. In the course of my life I have smiled this way at legions of people. Unfortunately, the more consciously I did it, the more I felt like an idiot.

I experienced what depressions are rather early on. I was ten or twelve. But even years later I didn't know yet what this incommunicable feeling really was and what it was called. It wasn't sadness. My multitude of secrets continued burgeoning in me. I didn't have much time to brood, anyway, because I was constantly playing soccer. I played soccer every day, even though I didn't play particularly well and made little technical progress, despite constant practice. When goals were made, mostly by others, I never screamed. My silent presence on the field was nonetheless intensely emotional. Fast movement has always easily put me in a trance, numbed me like a drug.

Part of my survival strategy was to never let a stranger into the labyrinth of our Prague apartment. When I received a visit at all, it was always one or two of my cousins from the other end of the hallway. Outsiders were kept waiting at the door until they were annoyed enough to leave. For them to see all the strange and diverse names on the door was bad enough. When such an intruder had been worn down long enough, he usually never came again. Our apartment was extremely misshapen, it was a monstrosity full of scars and ugly compromises. Unfortunately, not a single member

of the family could recognize that. Even the worst crimes against taste were simply ignored.

– Ugly? Why ugly? That sort of thing is never ugly.

But most of the adults not only lacked any sense of aesthetics. Because of the many divergent desires and needs in our compulsory community, the current and often only ridiculous functionality of the furnishings was idealized beyond all measure, so that there was next to no willingness to agree to even slight changes. My horror was not same as the ladies' horror, but we were all in despair nonetheless. Some aunts escaped into a compulsion to clean and wipe their personal partitioned areas. I didn't have such a safety valve. Most family members were undemanding and simply glad to have survived the war. But I ought to be glad they had no desire to beautify things.

Our apartment was jam-packed with dark pieces of furniture belonging to rich Germans who had fled to Austria in 1945. Though not all of this furniture was ugly – my mother's room had some splendidly original pieces – it was nonetheless devoid of feeling, assembled only for dubious practical reasons – that is, pushed together, piled on top of each other, or wedged into each other. The clunkiest, most outrageous monsters, in my opinion, were in my room, and the atmosphere emanating from them might have suited a destitute widow, but not me. Every single piece that the extended family possessed seemed to all of us eminently precious; and I, too, eventually realized that I would never in my life be able to part from certain things. In the course of time and despite everything, I made friends with some special, particularly good-smelling pieces of furniture. At times, some of them were closer to me than my mother was.

In our part of the apartment, little changed for decades and if it did, then not for the better. Usually, when someone died and their possessions were divided up, we got – as a memento of the dead person, whom we had known personally – some dark individual piece that did not suit our apartment. But even new light-colored furniture from modern socialist furniture factories would have been a disaster for the hodge-podge in our dwelling. Luckily, we never had enough money for new acquisitions. During the day, those who got along with each other liked to stay in my mother's cozy room while she was away at work. My room degenerated early into a pure bedroom, into a clothes room, laundry room, and storeroom. Provisions kept well in this sunless northern room next to the stairwell, because we almost never heated there.

Not only were there too many ugly things in the apartment that I had to keep hidden from outsiders, there were things there that posed decidedly ugly questions. And one met women there who said strange things with a foreign accent; one of them even made coarse grammatical errors. Also, these people often quarreled among themselves in German or Hungarian. Thanks to my isolationism, for much of my childhood I thought that most older women with white hair had lost their command of Czech due to infirmity.

Not all of these strange people who stayed with us during the day actually lived there. Stupidly, what was missing in the apartment was my father, or anything like a father. Short and stout as he was, he was certainly no exhibition piece, but his state of removal was definite and would have been hard to dispute. Mother's room had an array of varied upholstered armchairs, but there was never a double bed. Nor did my father sleep in my room; my main grandmother Lizzy slept there instead. That there were two beds in my "child's room" – now I feel shaken again – was even more secret than that my parents were separated.

Longing for female creatures whose job was to take care of you, I liked to go to shops dominated by warm-blooded women. Those where a ruthless male regime was established repelled me. Luckily, there were rarely such shops in those days. Coolly bustling self-service shops, mostly commanded by men, did not appear in our neighborhood until very late. And anyway, I grew up during a stage in the development of socialism in which many people still harbored fire-resistant illusions about their social and economic prospects. Though the mood in many places in the country was not the sunniest, it was generally satisfactory and certainly many notches better than later after the Russians invaded. So in my childhood and youth there were still real islands of happiness and optimism outside of our apartment, and I'm happy about that to this day. One such isle of the blessed was a fabric store, a place full of sophisticated, fragrant ladies and erotic undercurrents. And of course full of mostly ugly textiles that one eventually had to buy if one wanted to stay longer in such a shop.

On the face of it, I lived the life of a king in the interior-design hell of our apartment. I was beguiled, admired, and praised. I was loved more than anything else. So it is only logical that my life became a continuous story of falling in love. I could

also fall in love in a flash with purely material things like electric cables. But more about that later.