

My Brother the Messiah

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Martin Vopěnka

Translated from the Czech by

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About the Author



The Jewish-Czech author Martin Vopěnka is one of the leading voices in world literature, ‘reminiscent of both Kafka and Kundera’ – *Choice*. Martin’s 1989 debut *Kameny z hor* (Rocks from the Mountains) recorded memories and emotions from a journey across the Romanian Carpathians. His novels and travel writing since have continued to deliver a deep and intense exploration of our modern world. In 2016 his *Nová*

Planeta (New Planet) won the country’s premier Golden Ribbon Award. Martin heads the Association of Czech Booksellers and Publishers, and owns Práh publishing house.

“Martin Vopěnka is one of my favourite Czech writers because, like Milan Kundera, he is not Czech at all. You can’t find one anecdote or joke in his works, he is not boasting about his sense of humour. He is practically an off-geographical, modern writer for young people before their forties, who have realized that a real life is somewhere else. His writings are careful and precise, they have nothing in common with Hrabal’s language orgies. He is a Czech writer by chance. He could be British too.” – Mariusz Szczygiel, author of the best-selling *Gottland: Mostly True Stories from Half of Czechoslovakia*

The translator Anna Bryson Gustova took her DPhil in history from Oxford University. Anna first developed an interest in Czech culture as a Lecturer in Intellectual History at Sussex University. In 1989, following the Velvet Revolution, she spent a sabbatical in Prague and moved there permanently two years later. Anna works as an editor, writer and translator. Her partnership with Martin Vopěnka started with her 1995 translation of his novel *Ballad of Descent*.

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My Brother the Messiah

The Slav Colony in Northern Greece.

New Vinobradý, the autumn of 2168

1

Sermon in the Rain

A leaden raincloud had appeared over the mountain and was moving towards the bay even though a wind was blowing up from the sea. The gale leaned on Marek's hunched shoulders.

His audience sat faces to the wind. Worries at the worsening weather must have crossed their minds, but so far the gusts just seemed to be sharpening the edge of their attention.

Today there were slightly fewer people. It was because Petr was preaching in New Karlin. On the same day, out of spite.

Marek shook off the thought of the coming rain and the schism deepening with every day that passed. Those who had come kept their eyes fixed on him. That tall girl in the front row, too. He had never seen her here before.

He didn't feel he had anything to say to them, but he was used to that. The decision wasn't his to make. They were waiting for his words, and in the end the words would come. As they did now. "So this is why I know that God dwelt in him. God wanted to tell us something through him."

As he said it, he felt a resistance somewhere deep inside. It was to do with the word "God". Eli, his brother, had never expressed it like that. Eli had never clearly said he was a man chosen by God. But how else could he speak about Eli? How could he explain to people who had never seen Eli's face?

Marek still saw that face all the time. He still carried it inside, the face he had seen first sixty-five years ago when their mother had shown him the new-born Eli wrapped up in a blanket. That very moment Marek knew that he was looking at the most beloved of faces. Eli was so tiny, a little scrap. Eyes shut, eyelids firmly pressed

down. Yet already arousing wonder. And Marek had gazed at the same face thirty years later, when the life had drained out of it.

He overcame the moment of emotion and took a deep breath for the final words. The rain was rolling in fast down the slope of the green mountain, once just a wilderness of Mediterranean scrub. Many of those sitting here in the middle of the former corrupt beach resort, now reepeople, had left their dwellings open and their animals untethered. It was time to let the audience go.

“You are on the right path, all of you. On the right path to understanding his message. Eli used to say, ‘Go back to life. Find life again. Life comes from nature.’ Eli said, ‘There is no life in technology. He that has the sky over his head, has everything. He that has so much technology that he cannot see the sun and clouds, and doesn’t notice it is raining on him, has nothing. He on whom the rain falls has all the gifts of the world.’”

At that moment the first drops splashed onto the crumbled paving and the shoulders and hair of the gathered people. They all lifted their heads and their eyes widened in happiness. Only the girl in the front row continued to gaze intently at Marek.

All at once a murmuring sound came from somewhere above them, and it was neither wind nor rain. “Drone!” someone yelled, outraged. “It’s a drone with a camera!”

The gathering started to seethe with fury. A large young man found a stone and chucked it skywards, but it missed the drone and fell somewhere among the people, hitting no-one only by luck. Pandemonium broke out. Everyone grabbed stones.

The Girl with the Red Bag

The rain drummed on the raincoat that Marek had thrown over his head. Just a moment ago a preacher, he was now just an old bent man, limping down the alley between the bungalows. He felt a stab of pain in his right hip. This body was already losing its strength. He was seventy-two years old. Sand that had been washed down from the mountain during the last decades of rain scraped under his feet. Once upon a time, bare feet had pattered here along hot paving stones.

Marek's bungalow was not far away. He reached it at a run and glanced back quickly to confirm that the girl from the front row was following him. She was. These girls would turn up ready to give him everything, but he knew they were just looking through him for someone else – someone who was gone and whom they could therefore never know. They were loving Eli in Marek. Marek knew it, but didn't try to stop them. Being with them gave him pleasure.

Yet now he was feeling wearier than before. Probably it was the cold weather, already finding its way even to the Mediterranean. It was the beginning of autumn too.

She saw he had noticed her, and came right up to him on the doorstep without further ceremony. "May I?"

There was a hint of a foreign accent in her voice. Polish or Ukrainian or... It didn't matter. Everyone here had an accent. Over her shoulder she was carrying a large red bag that she must have bought in the town. Fair hair hidden under a blue hood. He was taken aback by the directness of her gaze. She seemed to know what she wanted. She looked fragile in the rain, but she probably wasn't fragile. "Come in," he said.

The fire was still crackling in the stove and in the dry warm air Marek forgot the pains of old age. "Where are you from? From Petr?" he inquired, taking off the raincoat. "I've never seen you here before."

“I heard Petr preach once. But I’m not from him. I live in the town.”

He looked at her with surprise. She had taken off her coat too and he could see her narrow shoulders and the curve of her small breasts. So there were people like her in the town too, he thought. In fact, recently there had been ever more of them. They would come, stay for a while and then go back to their old lives, but their numbers were said to be rising even there. Apparently they were forming their own groups. “Do you belong anywhere?”

“I’m by myself.” She smiled, and he noted again that she was not short on self-confidence. After a small silence she went on, “I like contact with people. I do massage.”

“Massage?” He was surprised. Once again he had found himself thinking she was fragile, too fragile for a masseuse. “And why have you come here?”

“I’ve come to give you a massage,” she said, in a matter-of-fact tone he found almost incredible. “You have a blockage in your lower spine. Your right hip is too low down. You carry a heavier load than you think you can bear. And you don’t keep warm enough. You need to warm up your kidneys.”

Warm up... Who didn’t need to warm up...? “I’m seventy-two years old,” he said. He wanted to sound above it all but instead he heard a hint of amazement in his own voice. And a touch of self-pity. “I’ll make tea.” Involuntarily he rolled his eyes. “Sit down.”

“I’ll make the tea and you lie down. There.” She gestured at the sheepskin that lay thrown across the bed.

3

What was your life like when you were still alone?

Something clicked in his back under the impact of her strength. She was braced with a hand on his right buttock and stretching his knee upwards. It made him feel like a frog. His feeling of sensual abandonment was mixed with shame. He was ashamed of his body – his decrepitude and age. He was ashamed of his yellowed skin and his purple knots of veins, and – worst of all – he was afraid that he stank. Fortunately she had covered him in some oil. He had his nose buried in the sheepskin and could smell the scent of the oil through the mustiness of the animal hair.

Eventually she had stretched him enough and the tension relaxed. The painful procedure was over. For a moment she moved away from him. He heard a rustling and had a good idea of what it was. He was overcome with dizziness. The girl sat down astride his calves, leaned forward and... began to draw herself along his legs and upwards. First he felt her hot breasts on his buttocks. And then her firm groin.

Eli had never said it was wrong. On the contrary, he used to say that touch was natural, just like love. When he had got together with Hana in Prague, the two had made love almost all the time. Back then it had bothered Marek. It was not until later that Eli had renounced physical love. Not because he disdained it or because he no longer desired it, but simply because he didn't want to beget a child. Yet Hana had recently been telling people that Eli had always been chaste. That he had been against sex. Her proof was precisely that he had no children. But of course he had no children. He had known that he ought not to have them, and that nothing of the kind would happen, but even so he hadn't wanted to tempt fate. After all it was Eli who had predicted that children would stop being born. Not completely, not to everyone. But still there would only be

very few. Back then nobody had believed him. They had attacked him, opposed him, but he never explained anything. He had said, “Our rule has ended. Now Earth itself will decide how many of us there should be.”

At the beginning Hana and Eli had slept together often. Marek remembered his feelings at the time well. Those two giving themselves up to each other behind a thin wall and he, Marek, embarrassed, not knowing what to think when someone people were beginning to call a saint did such things. He was afraid some of Eli’s supporters would find out and everyone would turn away from him. These days Hana was claiming that Eli had lived in purity, whereas Marek now knew with greater certainty than back then that his brother had done nothing bad. He had not been false to his teachings through physical love.

At least it was well-known that Hana had gone with Norwegians for money in Prague, since otherwise she would certainly now be claiming to be a virgin herself. The worst thing was that Petr had latched on to her claim. He was preaching about Marek’s brother’s sexual purity as if that was somehow the very basis of his message. He was making Eli into someone other than the man he had been and had wanted to be.

The girl continued to rub herself against Marek’s back. His thoughts were returning to her, to her ardent youth. He lifted his palms and felt the curve of her thighs. Her hand wandered between his legs. But that was not what he was after – not now. Even so, she started to stroke and squeeze him. It was pleasant even without an erection, and he raised his hips a little. She took it as a challenge and started to work him more strongly. He rolled over onto his side and gently took her by the arm. “It’s not about that,” he whispered. “It’s no longer about that for me.” He looked into her eyes, which were unexpectedly dark, as if everything stayed in them, and nothing was reflected back. Her lips were firmly shut. She gave him a questioning look.

In front of him was her whole perfect long body. It had a cohesiveness that suggested physical exercise. He let his hand wander downwards. He shut his eyes and found her tender places just by

touch. That was what suited him. She sighed and stretched, spread herself perhaps too acquiescently. But even if she was just pretending it all, it was worth it. He took her as a gift.

Afterwards they lay under the covers. She pressed close to him from the side, her long chin resting on his sharp shoulder, relaxed, perhaps satisfied. Now she was undoubtedly going to ask him about his brother. He didn't blame her for it. He assumed it would happen.

She did indeed raise her head and look him in the eyes. And she asked, "What was your life like when you were still alone?"

It confused him. It wasn't the question he had expected. "Alone? What do you mean 'alone'?"

"You were a lot older than he was. Nine years, they say. That's nine years of life before he was born."



4

Drought

The first nine years of his life. Now that he thought of it, had it really been life at all? Hadn't it only a kind of waiting?

Those years were marked by fear. It was everywhere, and most tellingly for him in the faces of his parents. They had a beautiful flat with a view over the River Vltava, in one of many gated districts. Their district was called Holesovice. His first memory? The stench. "Who made that stink?" Everyone is laughing. Marek guiltily drops his eyes. But it wasn't him. His parents are just joking. The smell comes from outside. From the water. The stagnant liquid in the riverbed is rotting. His parents' laughter subsides into worried sighs. His mother has another chin under her chin and sagging cheeks. Marek stretches out a childish hand. "What's this you've got here, Mummy?"

She takes no offence. "That's lard, Marek," she says. "So I won't die when there's nothing to eat anymore."

Marek can't understand. Why would there be nothing to eat? They have money, after all. His father brings it home, because he is protecting Mr. Lifelong. Mr. Lifelong is the most important person in the whole country. They say that "only he can save us". Which means that Dad is important as well. Dad is a saviour too.

His mother is also important. She teaches in a school in the gated district of Holesovice.

Marek goes to nursery school so that his mother can teach. He and the other boys in the class play at defending Holesovice – against Karlin, Brevnov, against beggars, Muslims... One day Dalibor shouts that today they are going to be defending Holesovice from the Warriors of the True Christ, who are the worst of all because they purify churches by burning all the paintings and statues and

killing anyone who's praying in the corrupt church, and they killed Dalibor's dad's brother.

Marek's mother picks him up from school in the afternoons. They walk along the river embankment and far below them the motionless water is gloomily silent. At the beginning of spring it doesn't stink so much, but its green brown leaden colour doesn't bode well. Dead birds float on the surface. In the summer dead fish floated there too. It hasn't rained for three years. Everything is yellow, parched, and only on the embankment edge does one strip of green survive.

They enter the house through the garage. That's the way Marek wants it. He wants to look at their magnetic car, which stands there as a memento of the better times he has never known. Apparently when his parents were young they drove in the car almost every day. One time they even went all the way to the seaside. When it was going the car floated just above the road, which was made of something amazing, and Marek can't understand – "It used to go back then and it doesn't go now? Why did it go back then?" He always asks the same question.

And Mummy always gives the same answer and her voice trembles. "Because today we can't make the material that the road was made out of. It's not imported any more. They stopped trading it when the world stopped being safe. You know what happened to my parents."

Yes, Marek knows. Something dreadful happened to Grandad and Grandma. Something for which there is no room in Marek's childish world. They got stuck in their magnetic car somewhere far away on a crumbling highway. And someone shot them dead.

"Back then it was still very rare, Marek," his mother adds. "People still didn't usually do that kind of thing. It was terribly bad luck. Today even if the roads still lead to the sea, we wouldn't make it. It's the drought. There are a lot of people who don't have our advantages. They're hungry."

"I want to ride in the car, at least somewhere."

"Even here the roads no longer work. We wouldn't get out of the garage. The cars you can see people driving today are powered by

electricity. That was normal a hundred years ago, and now they've had to go back to them. Until it rains and everything is like before," Mum has kept a little hope for the end, "and of course they'll repair the roads. Then we'll go for a drive. I promise."

The windows offer hope as well. When Marek looks at them he usually sees the River Vltava as it probably was before. Flowing water, green trees and bushes... He has heard that once there were moving images on the walls of apartments, and not just the window spaces.

Mr. Lifelong

Marek's father is rarely at home. He often stays at work for whole days and nights. Or comes back late in the evening when Marek is already asleep. One evening he comes into Marek's room when Marek is still awake. Marek opens his eyes and sees Dad's big face. The light from his little bedside light falls on Dad's high forehead with its first few wrinkles. In the dark, Dad's head seems even bigger than usual. His level blue eyes are hard to make out. But they are there.

"Daddy..." Marek stretches out his hand.

"Why aren't you asleep?"

"I've just woken up. Have you come home properly?"

"No, I've got to go straight out again,"

"Why do you always have to go out?"

"I have to protect Mr. Lifelong. I have to second guess any threats to him."

"Why's he called Lifelong?"

"Presidents used to come and go; they were elected. But that can't work at a time like this. Lifelong is a strong man. Just the kind we need today. Why would we want to elect a president, Marek, when we already have the best man in the job? I know some people criticize him for it. And some would like to kill him. They say he's seized power. But I know him. He's not power-hungry. He just does what is needed. He wants the best for our country."

"Who wants to kill him?" Marek asks. They must be awful people. Stupid and wicked. At least they'll never succeed when Dad's guarding Mr. Lifelong.

"No point in talking about them." Dad waves his hand. "I just wanted to tell you we're not giving up. Our country's going to be the way it used to be again. Then we'll mend the roads and we'll drive to the sea."

“Really, Dad?” Marek sits up in bed and puts his arms round his father’s neck. For a promise that will never be fulfilled.

“Of course. I believe it. And in a week... in a week I’m having a day off. We’ll take a trip into Prague. We haven’t been there for a long time.”

A very long time. So long Marek can’t remember it. “But you said it wasn’t safe there.”

“We mustn’t be scared, Marek. Fear is the worst thing. We can’t just lock ourselves up here in Holesovice. We’re going to live a normal life.”