



SPACEMAN
OF
BOHEMIA

JAROSLAV KALFAŘ

"The fiery, funny launch of an exciting new voice. Jaroslav Kalfař, like a good literary astronaut, finds levity in gravity, and vice versa." —Sam Lipsyte

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“The Sun Clock” by Karel Toman translated from the Czech by the author

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For my grandfather Emil Srb

*A house in ruins. Through the cracked walls
spread gluttonous ferns,
and the parasitic bands of lichen.*

*On the ground sprouts delphinium,
a nettle forest. The poisoned well
a water trough for rats.*

*The frail apple tree, split by lightning,
forgets whether it once bloomed.*

*On clear days, singing goldfinches
fall into the ruins. On sunlit bright days
a clock's arc lives
on the facade, capricious and joyful
the shadow of time dances,
and recites solemnly to the skies:
Sine sole nihil sum.*

For everything is a mask.

—Karel Toman, “The Sun Clock”

PART ONE

ASCENT

The Losing Side

MY NAME IS JAKUB PROCHÁZKA. This is a common name. My parents wanted a simple life for me, a life of good comradeship with my country and my neighbors, a life of service to a world united in socialism. Then the Iron Curtain tumbled with a dull thud and the bogeyman invaded my country with his consumer love and free markets.

Before I became an astronaut, the bogeyman and his new apostles asked if I'd like to change my name to something more exotic. More Western. Something befitting a hero.

I refused. I kept it as it was: common, simple.

SPRING OF 2018. On a warm April afternoon, the eyes of the Czech nation gazed from Petřín Hill as space shuttle *JanHus1* launched from a state-owned potato field. The Czech Philharmonic Orchestra wafted the national hymn between the city's Gothic towers, accompanying the countdown until, finally, the crowd gasped as the shuttle sucked and burned its cryogenic propellant and exploded upwards, all nine million kilograms of it, give or take the eighty kilograms of its single human inhabitant.

In a flash, *JanHus1* branded the hundred spires of the city with a dove-like stencil. Citizens and tourists alike followed the shuttle on its spherical climb until at last it vanished in the sunrays, reduced to a shadow captured by a few sharpshooting camera lenses. Leaving the vessel to its new fate in the heavens, the chattering citizens then descended Petřín Hill to quench their thirst for beer.

I witnessed my nation's triumph on a flickering, soundless monitor. It took about an hour to get used to the vibrations of the seat savagely bruising my buttocks. One of the chest constraints had cut through my suit and into

my areola, and I could not ease its grip. The launch chamber in which I sat was the size of a broom closet, a collection of phosphorescent screens, anorexic panels, and the spaceman's throne. The machinery around me, unaware of its own existence, quietly carried me away from home, indifferent to my discomfort. My hands shook.

I had refused to drink water before the launch, despite the insistence of my handlers. My ascent was the fulfillment of an impossible dream, a spiritual experience that could not be matched. The purity of my mission would not be stained by such an undignified gesture of humanity as urine making its way into my Maximal Absorption Garment. On the screen before me, my people waved flags, clutched sweating bottles of Staropramen, traded koruna bills for plastic shuttles and spaceman figurines. I searched for the face of my wife, Lenka, hoping to catch one last glimpse of her sorrow, a reassurance that I was loved and feared for, and that our marriage could withstand my eight months of absence, or worse. Never mind that my throat was parched, that my tongue scraped along the rough flesh of my gums, that the muscles in my body tensed and cramped as every basic comfort of human existence disappeared mile by mile, sliced away by the layers of atmospheric divisions. I owned these moments of history. Schoolchildren would repeat my name for centuries to come, and a sculpture of my likeness would inevitably join the lineup at Prague's wax museum. Already the billboards littering the horizons of Bohemia displayed my face looking upwards with practical gusto. Gossip magazines had suggested that I kept four mistresses and struggled with a gambling problem. Or that the mission was fake and I was merely a computer-generated image voiced by an actor.

Dr. Kuřák, my state-appointed therapist, had insisted that my launch would be filled with pure terror—a lone human being traveling to the unknown, living at the mercy of technology, indifferent and silent. I did not like Dr. Kuřák. He stunk of pickles and was a pessimist disguising himself as a man with experience. He had been in charge of preparing my fragile psychology for the mission, but mostly he had taken notes on my fears (food poisoning; caterpillars; the existence of life after death, as in the possibility that life could not be escaped) with a ferocity that suggested he hoped to pen my official biography. He had recommended that during my ascent I consume my favorite childhood candies (Tatranky, layered wafers dipped in chocolate, which I'd stashed in the compartment to my left) and ponder my

scientific duties to the world, the immense privilege I was honored with, to bring the Czechs their greatest discoveries since Jan Evangelista Purkyně had recognized the individuality of fingerprints, or perhaps since Otto Wichterle had invented the soft contact lens. My imagination embraced these ego arousals, and into the silence of the chamber I began to whisper my Nobel Prize acceptance speech, until my thirst became unbearable. I violated my resolve and pressed the H₂O switch, and the liquid flowed from the container underneath my seat to a straw attached to my shoulder. I was subject to my own physicality, a dwarf climbing a beanstalk to arm-wrestle the colossus, a cellular structure of banal needs for oxygen, for water, for the release of waste. *Banish the dark thoughts, drink your water*, I whispered as shots of adrenaline sharpened my senses and dulled the aches of my body.

Nearly a year and a half ago, a previously undiscovered comet had entered the Milky Way from the Canis Major galaxy and swept our solar system with a sandstorm of intergalactic cosmic dust. A cloud had formed between Venus and Earth, an unprecedented phenomenon named Chopra by its discoverers in New Delhi, and bathed Earth's nights in purple zodiacal light, altering the sky we had known since the birth of man. The color of the nighttime universe as observed from Earth was no longer black, and the cloud rested, perfectly static. It posed no immediate danger, but its stoic behavior tantalized our imaginations with dreadful possibilities. Nations scrambled to plan missions that would allow them to capture the particles of the mysterious Chopra and study these microscopic pieces of worlds beyond our own for chemistry and signs of life. Four unmanned shuttles had been sent to test Chopra's qualities and to carry samples back to Earth, but the probes had returned with empty bellies and no useful data, as if the cloud were a *fata morgana*, a collective dream of billions.

The next step was inevitable. We could not trust machines with the mission. A remote-controlled shuttle transporting German chimpanzee Gregor was dispatched to fly through the cloud and ensure that, with adequate protection, a human inhabitant could survive within Chopra long enough to observe and analyze samples manually.

Gregor had returned to his laboratory cage unharmed just as a new behavior was observed in the cloud: it began to consume itself, the mass of its outer layers dissipating and vanishing inside the thicker core. Some spoke of

antimatter, others assigned the cloud organic properties. The media offered speculations—which of the world’s governments would be brazen enough to send humans four months from Earth, toward a cosmic dust cloud of unknown and potentially lethal particles? Whispers, nothing but whispers from the Americans, the Russians, the Chinese, even the Germans, who had declared themselves the most serious about Chopra, given their offering of Gregor.

At last, an announcement came from a country of ten million, my country, the lands of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia. The Czechs would fly to Chopra and claim the mysteries it held. I would be their champion, the one to bring home the fanfare of scientific glory. In the words of a poet drunk on absinthe, reprinted in every major newspaper the next day: “With *JanHus1* lie our hopes of new sovereignty and prosperity, for we are now among the explorers of the universe. We look away from our past, in which we were claimed by others, in which our language was nearly eradicated, in which Europe covered its eyes and ears as its very heart was stolen and brutalized. It is not only our science and technology traveling through this vacuum; it is our humanity, in the form of Jakub Procházka, the first spaceman of Bohemia, who will carry the soul of the republic to the stars. Today, we finally and absolutely claim ourselves as our own.”

As I prepared for the mission, my daily routines became public property. The street in front of the apartment building where Lenka and I lived was so littered with media vans, snacking journalists, photographers situating their elbows on cars like snipers, stray children looking for autographs, and general onlookers that the police had to put up barricades and redirect traffic. Gone were my lone walks around town, the quiet contemplation of which apple to choose at the market. I had been assigned a posse that trailed me everywhere, for safety (already unhinged letters from fans and would-be lovers had flooded in) and assistance—helpers for grocery shopping, for fixing stray hairs on my head, for speaking. It wasn’t long until I couldn’t wait to leave Earth and, again, enjoy the simple luxury of solitude. Silence.

Now the silence was another unwelcome noise. I opened the snack compartment and bit into the Tatranky wafer. Too dry, a bit stale, tasting nothing like the childhood peace it was supposed to evoke. I needed to be elsewhere, in the comfort of a time I could understand, the life that had brought me to *JanHus1*. Existence runs on energy, a fluid movement

forward, yet we never stop seeking the point of origin, the Big Bang that set us upon our inevitable course. I turned off the monitor broadcasting my nation's festivities and closed my eyes. Somewhere in the deep circles of time colliding with memory, a clock ticked and tocked.

MY BIG BANG occurs in the winter of 1989 in a village called Středa. The leaves of the linden tree have fallen and rotted, and those uncollected have spread their brown mash across the fading grass stems. It is the morning of the Killing, and I sit in my grandparents' apple-scented living room, etching the image of Louda the pig in my sketchbook. My grandfather rubs the blade of his killing knife on the oval sharpener, taking a break here and there to bite into a thick slice of bread covered in lard. My grandmother waters her plants—the massive foliage of purple, red, and green surrounding every window—while whistling to the rhythm of a ticking clock. Below the clock hangs a black-and-white picture of my father as a schoolboy, smiling widely, the expression so earnest and unguarded, a smile I've never seen on his adult face. Šíma, our fat cocker spaniel, sleeps beside me, breathing hotly, reassuringly, onto the side of my calf.

This is the slow, silent world of a small village hours before the Velvet Revolution. A world in which my parents are still alive. In my near future awaits freshly cooked goulash, pigs' feet with homemade horseradish, and capitalism. My grandfather has banned us from turning on the radio. The Killing Day is his day. He has been lovingly feeding his swine, Louda, with a mixture of potatoes, water, and bulgur every morning and afternoon, scratching the animal behind the ear and grabbing fistfuls of his fatty sides, grinning. Louda is so fat he will burst if we don't kill him today, he says. Politics can wait.

This living room, this fireplace warmth, these rhythms of song, blade, dog, pencil, growling stomachs—perhaps somewhere around here a spontaneous release of energy occurred, sealing my fate as a spaceman.

My parents arrive from Prague at two o'clock. They are late because my father stopped by a field of daisies to pick a few for my mother. Even in an old blue parka and a pair of my father's sweatpants, my mother looks like one of the redheaded, milk-skinned actresses who play comrade damsels on TV, replete with the look of strong femininity and fierce dedication to the Party.

Father's whiskers are grown out more than I'm used to because he no longer has to shave for work. He is skinny, his eyes are puffy from the slivovitz he has been drinking before bed. Over forty of the neighbors gather, along with the village butcher who will help Grandpa with the slaughter. My father avoids eye contact with the neighbors, who aren't familiar with his line of work. If they find out he is a collaborator, a member of the Party's secret police, they will abandon my grandfather, my grandmother, they will spit on our family name. Not publicly, but with the quiet hostility born from fear and distrust of the regime. This revolution speaks against everything my father stands for. The neighbors are nervous with their hunger for change, while my father blows smoke through his pale lips, knowing that the same change would put him on the wrong side of history.

The yard is long and narrow, lined on one side by my grandparents' house and on the other by a towering wall of the next-door cobbler shop. On any other day it is littered with cigarette butts and Grandma's gardening tools, but on the day of the Killing, the dirt and patches of grass are swept clean. The garden and sty are separated from the yard by a tall fence, creating an arena, a Colosseum for my grandfather's last dance with Louda. We form a circle around the yard with an opening for Louda's entry. At five o'clock, Grandpa releases Louda from his pen and slaps him on the ass. As the pig runs around the yard, excitedly sniffing our feet and chasing a stray cat, Grandpa loads his flintlock pistol with gunpowder and a lead ball. I say good-bye to Louda, who's growing tired and slow, by patting him on the nose before Grandpa drags him to the middle of the circle and knocks him on the side with his boot. He puts the gun behind Louda's ear and the ball cracks through the skin, the flesh, the cranium. The pig's legs are still twitching when Grandpa cuts the throat open and holds a bucket underneath to collect the blood for soup and sausage. A few feet away, the butcher and the village men build a scaffold with a hook, and pour boiling water into an industrial tub. My father frowns and lights a cigarette. He isn't fond of the animal-killing business. Barbaric, he would say, to harm animals just going about their existence on this earth. People are the real bastards. My mother would tell him to stop putting such things into my head, and besides, he isn't exactly a vegetarian, is he?

The bristly hairs fall off Louda's pink body inside the tub. We hang him from the hook by the legs and slice down the middle, groin to chin. We peel

off skin, carve bacon, boil the head. My father checks his watch and walks inside the house. Through the window, I watch my mother watching him speak on the phone. No, not speak. Listen. He listens and he hangs up.

In Prague, five hundred thousand protesters flood the streets. Broken riot shields and bricks line their path. The ringing of keys and bells overshadows the radio announcements. The time for words has come and gone—what exists now is noise. The chaos of it, the release. Time for a new disorder. The Soviet occupation of the country, the puppet government backed by Moscow, all collapsing as the country's people call for freedoms of the West. To hell with these parasitic, ungrateful fucks, the Party leadership declares. Let the imperialists take them straight to hell.

We boil Louda's tongue. I pierce cubes of it with a knife and bring it to my mouth, hot, fatty, delicious. Grandpa cleans the pig's intestines with vinegar and water. This year, I am given the honor of the grinder—I stuff the sliced chin, liver, lungs, brisket, and bread into a hopper plate and push down while I turn the lever. Grandpa scoops the mash and stuffs it inside the cleaned intestines. He is the only man in the village who still makes *jitrnice* with his hands instead of using a machine. The neighbors wait patiently for these party favors to be done. As soon as Grandma divides them into packages, still steaming, the guests begin to leave, much earlier than usual, and half of them are not even close to drunk. They are eager to get back to their televisions and radios, to see about the events in Prague. Šíma begs for scraps and I allow him to lick lard off my finger. My mother and grandmother take the meat inside to bag it and freeze it, while my father sits on the couch, looks out the window, smokes cigarettes. I walk inside to enjoy the sharp scent of dinner goulash.

“Too soon to tell,” my mother says.

“So many people, Markéta. The Party wanted to send the militia out to disperse them, but Moscow said no. You know what that means? It means we're not fighting. The Red Army isn't behind us anymore. We're done. We should stay in the village, safe from the mobs.”

I go back outside to see Grandpa, who places a wheelbarrow in the middle of the yard. He loads it with dry logs and uses them to make a small fire. The dirt underneath our feet is soggy with organ blood. We slice bread and toast it to go with dinner as the sun sets.

“I wish Dad would talk to me,” I say.

“The last time I saw this expression on his face was when he was a kid and a dog bit his hand.”

“What’s going to happen?”

“Don’t tell your father, Jakub, but this is not bad.”

“So the Party will lose?”

“It’s time for the Party to leave. Time for something new.”

“But then we will be imperialists?”

He laughs. “I suppose so.”

Above the trees lining our gate, a clear horizon of stars blankets our view, so much clearer when not obscured by Prague’s street lamps. Grandpa hands me a slice of bread with a burnt edge, and I accept it between my lips, feeling like a man on television. People on television eat slowly when faced with a new reality. Perhaps it is here that a pocket of new energy bursts through the firm walls of physics and singles out a life so unlikely. Perhaps here I lose the hope for an ordinary Earthling life. I finish the bread. It is time to go inside and hear my father’s silence.

“Twenty years from now, you will call yourself a child of the revolution,” Grandpa says as he turns his back to me and urinates into the fire.

As is usually the case, he is right. What he doesn’t tell me then, perhaps out of love, perhaps out of a painful naïveté, is that I am a child of the losing side.

OR PERHAPS NOT. Despite the discomfort of my spaceman’s throne, despite the fear, I was prepared. I served science, but I felt more like a daredevil on his dirt bike, overlooking the powerful gap of the world’s greatest canyon, praying to all gods in all languages before making the leap for death, glory, or both. I served science, not the memory of a father whose idea of the world had crumbled over the Velvet Winter; not the memory of pig’s blood upon my shoes. I would not fail.

I slapped the Tatranky crumbs from my lap. The Earth was black and golden, its lights spreading across the continents like never-ceasing pebbles of mitosis, pausing abruptly to give reign to the uncontested dominion of dark oceans. The world had dimmed and the crumbs began to float. I had ascended the phenomenon we call Earth.

The Spaceman's World

WAKING TO THE OCCASION of my thirteenth week in Space, I unstrapped myself from the Womb and stretched, wishing I had curtains to spread or bacon to fry. I floated through Corridor 2 and squeezed a pea of green paste onto my blue toothbrush, courtesy of SuperZub, a major distributor of dental supplies and mission sponsor. As I brushed, I ripped the plastic off yet another disposable towel, courtesy of Hodovna, a major chain of grocery megastores and mission sponsor. I spit into the towel and looked closely at my gums, pink as a freshly scrubbed toddler, and the bleached molars, a result of my country's top dental artistry and a meticulous oral hygiene routine aboard the ship. Though I had resolved that I would no longer do so, I felt with my tongue around one of the molars, and a familiar pain intensified. Despite the high marks I had received from my dentists before takeoff, this tingling of decay appeared during my first week in Space, and I had kept it secret ever since. I was not trained for tooth extraction, and where could I find a good Space dentist? Would he bring his own nitrous oxide, or would he gather it from Earth's polluted atmosphere? I grinned to myself but refused to laugh. Never laugh out loud at your own jokes, Dr. Kuřák had advised. It is a sure sign of a deteriorating mind.

Perhaps the most jarring part of the mission was how quickly I'd adjusted to the routines. My first week in Space had been an exercise in uninterrupted expectation, as if I were sitting in an empty movie theater, waiting for the hum of a projector to light up a screen and chase away all thought. The lightness of my bones, the functions of my machines, the creaks and thuds of the ship as if I had upstairs neighbors, they all seemed exciting, worthy of wonder. But during week two, the desire for something new was already setting in, and the act of spitting toothpaste into a disposable towel instead of

an earthly sink lost its novelty. By week thirteen, I had forever abandoned the cliché of treasuring journey over destination, and in the daily tedium I found two methods of comfort: the thought of reaching the dust cloud to harvest its onerous fruits, and speaking to Lenka, her voice a reassurance that I still had an Earth to come back to.

I floated on through Corridor 3, unfastened the pantry door, and slathered a chunk of Nutella on a white pita. I flipped it up and watched it quiver through the air, like a pizza maestro spinning his dough. Food was my silent co-conspirator on this flight away from home, an acknowledgment of sustenance and thus the rejection of death. The ship burned its fuel and I burned mine, the chocolate-flavored protein blocks and the dehydrated chicken cubes and oranges, sweet and juicy inside the freezer. Times had changed since astronauts relied on a diet of powders as rich and enjoyable as expired packets of Tang.

As I ate, I knocked on the dead-eyed lens of the sleek surveillance camera provided by Cotel, major manufacturer of electronics and mission sponsor. One of the dozen broken cameras on the ship, failing one by one as the mission went along, causing the company embarrassment and heavy losses in the stock market. No one could figure out what had gone wrong with the devices—the company even put three of their best engineers on a conference call to guide me through a repair process, broadcasting the video feed online in hopes of reestablishing their brand. No luck. Of course, I did not disclose the presence of insistent scratching that resonated throughout the ship whenever one of the cameras went offline, skittering away quickly as I approached from beneath the corner. Such hallucinatory sounds were to be expected, Dr. Kuřák claimed before the mission, because sound is a presence of something earthly, a comfort. No need to chase ghosts. Besides, I did not mind that the cameras no longer observed my every step—I could enjoy violations of my strict nutritional guidelines with sweets and alcohol, I could skip workouts, I could move my bowels and enjoy onanism without worrying about my guard dogs watching. There was great pleasure in being unseen, and perhaps it was best that the world's collective imagination was teased by the denial of a 24/7 video feed of their Spaceman in sweatpants.

The day ahead was to be a pleasant one. After finishing a few usual menial tasks—testing Ferda, the cosmic dust collector and the tech star of my mission; engaging in a halfhearted cardio session; and running diagnostics on

my oxygen water tank—I was to have a few hours of peace and reading before dressing myself for a video call with my wife. Afterward, I was to enjoy a glass of whiskey to celebrate being only four weeks away from my destination, cloud Chopra, the gassy giant that had altered Earth’s night skies and escaped our attempts to study it. After penetrating the cloud, I was to gather samples with the help of Ferda, the most sophisticated piece of Space engineering to ever come from Central Europe, and study them inside my custom-designed lab on my way back to Earth. This was the reason the Space Program of the Czech Republic had recruited me, a tenured professor of astrophysics and accomplished researcher of space dust at Univerzita Karlova. They had trained me for spaceflight, basic aerospace engineering, and suppression of nausea in zero gravity. They asked if I would take the mission even if there was a chance of no return. I accepted.

Thoughts of death visited me only as I fell asleep. They came as a slight chill underneath the fingernails, and left when I lost consciousness. I did not dream.

I wasn’t sure whether I was more anxious about reaching the mysteries of Chopra or about the upcoming conversation with Lenka. Conducting an Earth/Space marriage through these weekly video feeds felt like watching an infection claim healthy flesh inch by inch while making plans for next summer. After these thirteen weeks, I noticed that there was a steady rhythm to human longing.

Monday, raw stage: God, babe, I miss you. I dream of your morning breath on my wrists.

Tuesday, reflective nostalgia: Remember when the Croatians stopped us at the border and tried to confiscate our schnitzel sandwiches? You unwrapped one and started eating it, shouted at me to eat too, shouted that we would eat them all before crossing and show those fascists what’s what. I knew I’d marry you then.

Wednesday, denial: If only I wish it just right, I’ll be back in our bedroom.

Thursday, sexual frustration and passive aggression: Why aren’t you here? What is it you do with your days as I spit into a blue towel—courtesy of Hodovna, mission sponsor—and count the hours separating me from gravity?

Friday, slight insanity and composition of songs: *A scratch you can’t itch.*