

# **Silent Voice**

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A list of characters

**CLERK**

**DIRECTOR**

**DOCTOR**

**WOMAN**

**PEOPLE**

**PEOPLE AT THE FAIR**

**PEOPLE ON THE STREETS**

## Prologue

**CLERK** Welcome. I'm glad you found time to join me today. I can see a question in your faces: Why are we here, actually? Well, I don't know about you, but I'm quite clear why. In human life ... hmm, in life, how strange it sounds ... but back to the topic. Every day we make decisions that affect our life to a degree. Yet, what if our decision can change not only our life, but the lives of others?! That's why I want to share with you this story. Where to begin ...

Mining tradition in Slovakia dates back as far as 700 years. It all began well. With mining of precious metals that made their way to the royals and sovereigns across Europe. Small mines in tiny settlements, yet the ore was precious. Until the most profitable sources became exhausted.

Then came industrial boom at the break of the 19th and 20th centuries that brought along further mining. Lots of natural resources had to be mined, particularly fuel. Coal became the black gold. This very place at the Upper Nitra region, around the town of Handlová, was destined to become one of the most lavish sources of coal.

In the earlier days, as I said already, the tradition entailed small mining towns with a single mine. Yet now it grew into a grand scale. Four mines opened with joint surface facilities and the miners created a mining colony here.

Don't worry, this isn't going to be lecture of any kind. I started broadly, but I couldn't help it. Professional distortion. I had forgot that you have no clue who I am. I show up, start lecturing and you are bound to keep asking yourselves whether you are in the right place after all. You are indeed! I'll be brief. I was a civil servant at the Ministry of Environment. I no longer remember how long I was there. You know, when you're on sick leave or on vacation, it doesn't matter whether it's Monday or Friday; a day tends to vanish here and there. I'm getting lost a bit, so I better get to the point. You'll understand plenty. If not and there's time left, you are welcome to ask questions.

At the beginning there was a word ... Stay put, just kidding.

## Scene 1

*Office of the mine Director.*

**DIRECTOR** Welcome, colleague!

**CLERK** Thank you. It's kind of you to receive me. Many directors only send their PAs.

**DIRECTOR** Why wouldn't I receive you? We have nothing to hide.

**CLERK** Most kind of you indeed!

**DIRECTOR** It's down to my traditional upbringing. Noblesse oblige.

**CLERK** Still, you didn't have to receive me in your office and could've instead send some bureau... ehm, PA, to see me and show me around the mine.

**DIRECTOR** That's not my style.

**CLERK** I see.

**DIRECTOR** What brings you here?

**CLERK** How about we drop the soft talk. We both know why I am here, and it is you and no other to be here.

**DIRECTOR** You're being unfair.

**CLERK** Naturally. Moreover, I'm here to no avail.

**DIRECTOR** My point.

**CLERK** Thought so.

**DIRECTOR** Don't get me wrong, but there is nothing to check here.

**CLERK** I understand.

**DIRECTOR** What do you mean?

**CLERK** Don't worry about it.

**DIRECTOR** I know what you're thinking.

**CLERK** Really?

**DIRECTOR** You all are the same: you think we keep hiding something.

**CLERK** Are you?

**DIRECTOR** No. Just because I'm nervous, it doesn't mean I'm hiding anything.

**CLERK** Sure.

**DIRECTOR** Look. Here, in this small town, things may seem strange to you; though it's perfectly regular.

**CLERK** I come from a small town myself. I know how things are in such places.

**DIRECTOR** Great. I'm glad. At least I can pull myself together, knowing you're one of us.

**CLERK** I'd hope so.

**DIRECTOR** What would you like to know?

**CLERK** Everything – ideally.

**DIRECTOR** Funny.

**CLERK** If you say so.

**DIRECTOR** It's a lot of paperwork. Lifetime isn't enough to get through it all.

**CLERK** I don't need to plough through everything. All I need is the material on the relaunch of brown coal mining in this region.

**DIRECTOR** You should've said so right away. I'd have the paperwork ready for you.

**CLERK** So you really don't know why I'm here?

**DIRECTOR** No idea.

**CLERK** I see.

**DIRECTOR** So, why are you here? (*puts on a sly smile*)

**CLERK** The Ministry of Environment send me to check that the relaunch of the brown coal mining and its burning falls within national interest.

**DIRECTOR** Right.

**CLERK** The study you've presented is impressive. Still, there is some pressure for a review.

**DIRECTOR** Ah, the activists! Well, we quite know here how to talk to them.

**CLERK** How?

**DIRECTOR** Last time when some activists attempted to stage a protest, we had them locked up to make them think it over. (*bursts in laughter*)

**CLERK** What did they do?

**DIRECTOR** Silly thing ... They climbed up the mining tower and rolled out a banner. We accused them of undermining the mining and of acting against public interest. That was fun!

**CLERK** And did they?

**DIRECTOR** Doesn't matter, naturally.

**CLERK** What matters then?

**DIRECTOR** Here? The mining and the jobs it brings. Whole generations here have been making their living of mining. And they have fared pretty well.

**CLERK** I think it right for people to try keep an eye on what's going on in the country.

**DIRECTOR** People only think they know what they want.

**CLERK** And don't they?

**DIRECTOR** Not the least.

**CLERK** And what is it then they want?

**DIRECTOR** That's a catch.

**CLERK** It's no test. Let's drop it. We can go on like this for days and won't get anywhere.

**DIRECTOR** Indeed.

**CLERK** Do you have the time to waste with me?

**DIRECTOR** Ehm, well, you're right, I shouldn't have. Hence, I don't have the time.

**CLERK** Glad to hear it. So, you will show me the paperwork required to review your application for the mining relaunch, right?

**DIRECTOR** Sure. (*reaches into a drawer of his desk to retrieve a piece of paper with a name and address*)

**CLERK** Do you often do barbeque?

**DIRECTOR** Why?

**CLERK** You've got plenty of aluminium foil in your drawer.

**DIRECTOR** Ah, emergency stock. I try to be a good leader, I mean director. Hence, I always have the grill foil in stock. When it's someone's anniversary or as need arises, we can do a barbeque, or just kick around a foil ball.

**CLERK** You must be you kidding.

**DIRECTOR** Yeah. About the ball.

**CLERK** So you do company barbeques?

**DIRECTOR** Do you feel like one?

**CLERK** No, thank you.

**DIRECTOR** (*seems a bit disappointed*) Pity. Should you eventually feel like it, we've got plenty of foil.

**CLERK** And have you got the paperwork ready for the brown coal mining relaunch?

**DIRECTOR** For that you've got to speak to our doctor. He drafted the study and recommended to relaunch the mining. We simply responded and acted in public interest.

**CLERK** You were swift, not even waiting for the OK from the Ministry.

**DIRECTOR** When it comes to health, we don't waste time. If there is the slightest chance that the mining and subsequent coal burning improves health of fellow residents, there's nothing to wait for.

**CLERK** So, all that you do, is in public interest?!

**DIRECTOR** Indeed. That's why I handed you the name and address of our doctor. Check it all with him.

**CLERK** Will do.

**DIRECTOR** I know you will.

*Silence, they don't look at each other.*

**CLERK** Would you recommend some social do to me?

**DIRECTOR** Where do you live?

**CLERK** Doesn't matter, I'll come anywhere in town to make the most of the local allure.

**DIRECTOR** (*smiles bitterly*) Well then, I'd suggest the Miners' Fair.

**CLERK** Thank you. See you there?

**DIRECTOR** I wouldn't miss the opportunity of meeting you at the Fair.

**CLERK** Good bye.

**DIRECTOR** Farewell!

*Clerk leaves.*

**DIRECTOR** Dodo! Would you dial the doctor for me!

## Scene 2

**CLERK** In the first instant, the Director was all-keen. Yet it made him come across ever sleazier. Though it was slightly concerning that he had been aware of my arrival, lately it was something that used to happen to me increasingly often. So I didn't care.

To help you navigate a little through what you've seen. Brown coal that is mined and burned in the Upper Nitra region has lower heat value than black coal. Mining was thus subsidised for years and has only been effective because of the state aid. Just like a private whim of a politician. The government, however, eventually decided to withdraw the funding by 2023. And so it happened. It was unprofitable for the mine. The operations grew limited what led to redundancies. And then, suddenly, as if by miracle, news came that the sudden cessation of brown coal burning resulted in deteriorating public health in the region. Hence, the burning had to be relaunched instantly so the clean air wouldn't harm local residents: their lungs weren't used to clean air. I see the surprised looks on your faces. That is indeed why I'm here. The director no doubt intends it to be mere formality. Because they drafted the study that confirms the claim. Yet he's due to have hard time with me.

### Scene 3

**CLERK** Hello.

**DOCTOR** Hi.

**CLERK** I'm from the Ministry of Environment. They sent me to ...

**DOCTOR** I know.

**CLERK** Well, that will save us time.

**DOCTOR** What do you want?

**CLERK** You said you knew why they sent me.

**DOCTOR** I do. But what is it you want?

**CLERK** I guess I don't understand.

**DOCTOR** Well then, let me start again. I'll get ready. *(retrieves a bottle of palinka from the cupboard, pours himself a glass and has a sip)* Ready now. How about you?

**CLERK** *(smiles sarcastically)* Slightly cliché, don't you think?

**DOCTOR** No worries, I'll have a smoke soon to make you happy.

**CLERK** We got off on the wrong foot. How about we start again?

**DOCTOR** As you wish. Will you have one?

**CLERK** No thanks, I'm teetotaler.

**DOCTOR** Too bad for you. I washed the cups today. *(pulls out a cigarette, lights it, offers it to the Clerk who turns it down)* One's got to die of something.

**CLERK** Yet I don't feel like ending it at pulmonary ward.

**DOCTOR** *(returns his sarcastic smile)* Well, then you're in the right place.

**CLERK** What do you mean?

**DOCTOR** Well, let's drop it. We've been through the introductions and the awkward comments, so let's get back to business. What is it you want?

**CLERK** Right. I'd like to see your records based on which they relaunched the brown coal mining and burning in the mines here.

**DOCTOR** Everything is in those ledgers: serve yourself.

*Clerk starts leafing through the folders and pulling out individual files. He is reading them; he stands up here and there, and paces up and down. Meanwhile, the Doctor keeps drinking and smoking.*



**CLERK** All those people in the records – are they your patients?

**DOCTOR** Guess so. Should be. I mean some used to be, some still are. Does it matter?

**CLERK** Certainly. I'm here to confirm that all data in the explanatory memorandum are accurate, that you stand by them. Otherwise I could only ask for them to be sent to me.

**DOCTOR** Accurate?

**CLERK** Yes.

**DOCTOR** You believe that the memorandum is important and substantial. Yet soon you will realise that truth is a mere conviction which we are willing and able to believe in. Nothing more to that.

**CLERK** I wouldn't expect this from a scientist.

**DOCTOR** Me a scientist?!

**CLERK** You are a doctor and the author of this specialist study that linked the reduction of emissions to deterioration of health among the people in the region?!

**DOCTOR** Ah, that! I always forget.

**CLERK** When did you come to suspect there was a connection?

**DOCTOR** No idea. I bet I put it down in the study. You are free to read it.

**CLERK** If I wanted to read it ...

**DOCTOR** Then you'd have it sent in, I know.

**CLERK** Precisely.

**DOCTOR** Alright then. What do you want?

**CLERK** Answers.

**DOCTOR** Everything is in the medical reports and in the study.

**CLERK** Is not.

**DOCTOR** Then the rest is in the explanatory memorandum.

**CLERK** That contains even less: it's a mere reduction of your study.

**DOCTOR** My study. I'll never get used to it till I die.

**CLERK** Then you shouldn't have written it.

**DOCTOR** Good one! I shall remember that. (*has a sip*) Perhaps. A drink, cigarette?

**CLERK** No.

**DOCTOR** Right, I know. You don't drink or smoke. You're starting to piss me off with that attitude.

**CLERK** Why?

**DOCTOR** It's dodgy. You put on too perfect a face. It won't get you far here.

**CLERK** What do you mean?

**DOCTOR** The locals don't trust anyone flawless. They'll never open up to someone like that. And will never tell the truth.

**CLERK** Yet the truth rests in the medical records and the study.

**DOCTOR** Yeah, I forgot.

**CLERK** Put it down to the booze.

**DOCTOR** Nope, though I'd like to.

**CLERK** Well, that will do for the day.

**DOCTOR** I haven't finished the bottle.

**CLERK** It's not what I meant.

**DOCTOR** Good for you.

**CLERK** Thank you. See you tomorrow. I'm still missing ...

**DOCTOR** Some answers. I know. Except I doubt you find them here.

**CLERK** And where will I find them?

**DOCTOR** (*smiles*) You'll come up with something. After all, you're some clerk.

#### Scene 4

**CLERK** In this region, namely, in that of Trenčín, energy sector represents the major cause of air pollution. It's down to the poor quality of fuel and energy sources. Guess which the most affected area is. Right, Upper Nitra.

Some figures? (*pulls out a chunky folder*) Which year shall we look at? Do I hear 2001?

Pretty good choice. Lots of NO<sub>x</sub> emissions – it is annually 10, 263 tons for the entire region, of which 6, 409 in the district of Prievidza. The amount of SO<sub>2</sub> emissions for the entire region is 45, 439 ton per annum, of which it is 43, 099 for the district of Prievidza. I can go on and on. Indeed, the volume changes interannually. Yet it is always this particular district that has the major share in air pollution.

Once you hear the figures it sounds more petrifying, right? I understand. That is why we are trying to reduce the emissions. Indeed, not all emissions are down to mining and burning the coal, though it does represent a significant share.

You know what's funny? Each of you here pay for the pollution. Bad joke, still a joke.

## Scene 5

*Miners' Fair – market stands with food and drinks, clothes, different wooden toys, something like Christmas fair in any town, except for the sturm.*<sup>1</sup>

**PEOPLE AT THE FAIR** At last. My first sturm this year. I managed even earlier. You've got to know where to go.

The mines messed up the river again.

But that's only this time in a year. I will pass again. As always.

At our end it's dirtier than usual. The hell with those mines!

Do as I do. When it happens, I prevent my kids from swimming in the creek. And it's sorted.

Once it passes, everything's OK.

Last time my husband came home with a broken arm. At last he had an excuse not to do any chores.

Not many of our own work there anymore. It's more foreigners by the day. Bloody immigrants. For who would want to do such hard work today. One's got to use brain to make living, I always tell my kids. They should study hard not to have to work there.

Exactly.

Have you heard of the review they've got?

Sure. Let them find something, so the management pays for their mistakes.

*Clerk arrives. Browsing through the stands. Then arrives the Director.*

**DIRECTOR** So glad you've come. I feared I'd miss you.

**CLERK** Just wanted a walk. I was told it's quite an event for the locals.

**DIRECTOR** Everything dedicated to miners is an event for the locals. I'm proud we can treat them like this.

**CLERK** So it's convened by the mine?

**DIRECTOR** No. Why?

**CLERK** You just said ...

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<sup>1</sup> Transl. note: sturm, from German, is fresh, slightly fermented wine that is drunk in Central Europe during wine harvest.

**DIRECTOR** You should try this sturm. It's from a local producer. Not too good, but got the kick!

**CLERK** Perhaps later.

**DIRECTOR** Have you managed to get your feet on the ground yet?

**CLERK** Getting used to being here.

**DIRECTOR** With such pace you better get used to it before you leave.

**CLERK** Sending me away already?

**DIRECTOR** Not at all. Feel free to stay even after the review.

**CLERK** Don't want to rush.

**DIRECTOR** Not worth to even think of rushing, for this is a straightforward case, not much to investigate.

**CLERK** It shall be up to me to decide, if I may.

**DIRECTOR** Sure thing. I didn't mean to hurt you. Just trying to help.

**CLERK** You might as well give me a tip for a nice restaurant.

**DIRECTOR** But of course. We've got a few nice pizzerias.

**CLERK** How about something with traditional cuisine?

**DIRECTOR** You're not into pizza? Never mind. Why don't you come by for the barbie – homemade burgers and so on.

**CLERK** Thank you. Not sure it would be appropriate.

**DIRECTOR** As you wish. Though no one would find it strange here.

**CLERK** I shall think about it.

*Director leaves, Clerk continues browsing through the stands. Someone drops their wallet; Clerk looks around and notices everyone "discreetly" looking at him.*

**CLERK** Hello, you've dropped your wallet! Wait!

*Clerk charges after the person who lost their wallet.*

**PEOPLE AT THE FAIR** Did you see?

He actually gave it back.

While being unnoticed. At least by the one who dropped it.

Weird.

He seems honest.

Weird. He comes from the Ministry and yet, he is decent. Hard to believe.

No way honest. Had no one been here, he'd be off to a pub.

What if he is decent after all?

That's even worse. What if he is so honest that the mine closes down?

*Clerk returns.*

**CLERK** Hello, how's everyone?

*People are silent, pretending to chat to each other.*

**CLERK** Would you tell me where one can get some nice meal?

**PEOPLE** Nice weather, isn't it?

Nice indeed.

Wouldn't you agree?

**CLERK** Absolutely, but ...

**PEOPLE** Sorry, got to go, I left my soup on the stove.

Wrong. I always turn it off before leaving and finish it when back.

Look, they've got mead over there.

And the new sturm merchant.

Sorry, another time.

*People leave Clerk, though they stop close by behind. Doctor arrives with sturm in one hand and a plastic bag in the other.*

**DOCTOR** How are you?

**CLERK** I'm fine. And so are you by the looks of it.

**DOCTOR** It's just sturm. Same in the bag.

**CLERK** A family do?

**DOCTOR** No, why? Have you met the locals yet?

**CLERK** Not really. They're avoiding me. Alternatively, they always talk about weather and then dash off.

**DOCTOR** I did tell you that you're different from them. They won't talk to a stranger just like that. Especially when everyone around knows you're here.

**CLERK** How come?

**DOCTOR** Everyone here is linked to the mines in one way or another. Either today or through ancestry.

**CLERK** Can I ask you something?

**DOCTOR** Go ahead.

**CLERK** (*takes him aside and whispers*) Would you tell me why everyone is giving me such strange gaze and keeps following me?

**DOCTOR** Look, when the mines went through the crisis under the Communism, because no one wanted to work there, do you know what they did? Two things. They brought inmates for heavy labour and, at the same time, they offered fat salaries. Some went in for the money, others had no choice. In the end, everyone settled here. And then, years pass, someone comes who seems honest. And something sets their DNA into alarm.

**CLERK** Must be kidding.

**DOCTOR** A bit. Honest people are suspect all across Slovakia

**CLERK** That's quite sad.

**DOCTOR** Everyone around is trying to bribe. Using sausages, eggs, spirits or money. Folk culture.

**CLERK** How come you can live with it?

**DOCTOR** Years of practice.

**CLERK** I guess I couldn't live like that. I wouldn't even attempt, I guess.

**DOCTOR** People are like trees in the storm: they either bend or the storm breaks them.

**CLERK** What a perspective!

**DOCTOR** Perhaps. But I'd rather be a surprised pessimist than a disappointed optimist. Take care and don't let anyone break you.

**CLERK** Goodbye, doctor.

*Doctor leaves, Clerk is still browsing through the stands, looking around, until he disappears in the crowd.*

**PEOPLE AT THE FAIR** But what if they really close the mines? How many people would lose their job?

How many would lose their job?

That mustn't happen. Someone's got to do something about it.

So what if there's a bit of arsenic in the water?

Right.

We shouldn't be speaking with him.

Yeah, so that we don't happen to leak out anything inadvertently.

We've got to stick together like proper miners.

Got anyone working in the mine?

Nope. How about you?

So why do we want to keep silent?

My cousin has an acquaintance whose father has a brother who knows someone working in the mine.

Well then, we mustn't allow that to happen.

We shall remain silent.

Better leave things the way they are. What if they get worse?

*The crowd disappears, only Clerk and Woman, standing behind him, remain.*

**WOMAN** Are you the clerk from the Ministry that people are talking about?

**CLERK** Yes.

**WOMAN** No one wants to talk to you about the mines. And they won't.

**CLERK** Why?

**WOMAN** They're afraid. Mine is like a symbol to them, which they are afraid to lose.

Keeping the status quo is greater certainty than facing a change.

**CLERK** Why are you telling me?

**WOMAN** For I am no longer afraid. Come to this address tomorrow. *(hands him a note and leaves)*

*Clerk also leaves. Director and the man who first dropped his wallet appear on stage.*

**DIRECTOR** Keep an eye on him. I don't like surprises.

*Both leave, each in different direction.*

## Scene 6

**CLERK** Why so much secrecy like in a thriller? A chance encounter at the fair and a date set for a different time and place.

**WOMAN** Are you serious? You saw the way they were looking at you!

**CLERK** I see. You're afraid what they would say about you?

**WOMAN** I don't care, they gossip about me already. But I don't want my relatives to get hurt. I mean someone else.

**CLERK** There's nothing enjoyable about gossip. Though you ought to know how to live with it.

**WOMAN** You don't get it, do you? It's not about gossip. Everything finds its way to the mine director.

**CLERK** Do you work for the mines?

**WOMAN** No, but I used to.

**CLERK** Your relatives?

**WOMAN** Nope.

**CLERK** Why, then, are you so afraid of him?

**WOMAN** (*smiles bitterly*) Why do you think I am?

**CLERK** Obviously he holds many by their neck.

**WOMAN** See, you are able to use your brain when you want. Everyone in high places is identified by aluminium foil.

**CLERK** Why did you ask me to come?

**WOMAN** Even though I no longer work for the mine, I've got some documents for you.

**CLERK** What kind?

**WOMAN** Documents from the mine.

**CLERK** I got that, but what kind?

**WOMAN** We used to be good friends with the doctor. Until I was fired, and he ended up being the director's alibi.

**CLERK** Why did you get fired?

**WOMAN** Officially? Cut downs and reorganisation.

**CLERK** Though you think otherwise ...

**WOMAN** I know so. It would be quite a coincidence.

**CLERK** Coincidences happen.

**WOMAN** Not here, even if they pretend so.



**CLERK** Sounds a bit like conspiracy.

**WOMAN** Being paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you.

**CLERK** Let's close it with this Cobain quote. Why did you get sacked?

**WOMAN** When they started closing the mines, they were gradually making miners redundant. Only we, the admin staff, were left behind.

**CLERK** What was your job?

**WOMAN** I was a secretary working for the executive management. One day the director came up with an idea that we would petition for the relaunch of the mining. He said the miners signed already and it was time for the admin staff should follow the suit.

**CLERK** You didn't sign ...

**WOMAN** Nope. I thought it was voluntary. Moreover, I didn't agree with the idea. The mining is damaging to us all, it is devastating for the forests and land.

**CLERK** The study suggests that the mining disruption was detrimental to public health.

**WOMAN** I thought you being cleverer than this. After I refused to sign it, the director summoned me in and tried to massage my brain.

**CLERK** Did he threaten you?

**WOMAN** Indirectly. Still, I didn't sign. He said he didn't need my autograph anyway. He warned me that he had a plan and I'd be sorry for not having signed. For a while, nothing happened. Then the study appeared, and the mines started rehiring the miners: It was then that I was made redundant. At the time they needed extra admin staff.

**CLERK** What else did they tell you?

**WOMAN** Off the record? That I acted against the company interest and, even though the paperwork was growing, the company would be better off without me. They gave me severance pay. As I was leaving, the director snapped that he had warned me.

**CLERK** Have you tried to litigate against the dismissal?

**WOMAN** First I would have to be able to prove it and ...

**CLERK** No one here would go against the director of the mines.

**WOMAN** Precisely.

**CLERK** In any case, you probably didn't ring me, since you have no way of proving that and, particularly, as it has nothing to do with the environment.

**WOMAN** You're starting to show potential. I told you the doctor and I were on good terms.

**CLERK** You were?

**WOMAN** We were.

**CLERK** Why the past tense?

**WOMAN** Doesn't matter.

**CLERK** (*smiles*) Got it.

**WOMAN** No, you don't, but never mind. It wasn't the doctor who wrote the study.

**CLERK** I can see that.

**WOMAN** At least something. You wanted evidence. Here you go: the doctor's real records.

**CLERK** Interesting.

**WOMAN** Don't tell me you didn't see that coming.

**CLERK** I didn't expect to lay my hand on something like that. How could he expect to get away with this? For anyone in their right mind is bound to differentiate between correlation and causality.

**WOMAN** See?! He just turns up and points two facts: mining interruption and increased morbidity. Plus tops it up with massaged data. And, finito!

*Woman seems to have spotted someone, but instantly returns her gaze to the Clerk.*

**CLERK** Tell me one more thing ...

**WOMAN** No, you should be going now. Don't forget the records.

**CLERK** Thank you. Should you need anything, ...

**WOMAN** I won't.

## Scene 7

**CLERK** I told you already about the brown coal and its lower heat value. Yet I forgot to add that lignite is also mined here. It is the least charcoaled coal. It shows the wood structure. It has the lowest heat value and is usually the latest coal.

It is this very lignite that is being burned here. That was also the case back in 2015. The Nováky power plant that used to burn it, produced 46,755 tons of SO<sub>x</sub> emissions in 2015, what ranked it number two in Europe. When converted into the installed output, it was straight to number one. Hence, it was identified as one of the most toxic power plants. Judging by the standards applied to power plants, it was morally obsolete and liable to failures.

Yet, a few years had passed, and all this was forgotten. The power plant is up and running happily ever after.

## Scene 8

*Doctor's clinic, Clerk enters, looking for Doctor who appears from somewhere.*

**DIRECTOR** Welcome, colleague.

**CLERK** What are you doing here?

**DIRECTOR** How about a decent Hello?

**CLERK** How about you stop being after me?

**DIRECTOR** You're being unfair.

**CLERK** The fact that I told nothing to your lackey doesn't mean I didn't notice him. He's been after me for a few days now.

**DIRECTOR** I don't know what you're talking about.

**CLERK** Indeed! You should get better at choosing your snoops. Someone who relieves himself by your side at a bus stop isn't too inconspicuous, is he? What do you want?

**DIRECTOR** A chat.

*Silence grows.*

**CLERK** Go ahead!

**DIRECTOR** Calm down. Such tone doesn't befit you.

**CLERK** (*forces a smile*) What is it you want?

**DIRECTOR** You should be careful whom you befriend. Some people here don't enjoy good reputation.

**CLERK** That is my business, isn't it?

**DIRECTOR** Just so that you don't fall for lies. To many, my successful company is pain in the rear.

**CLERK** Let me guess? Meaning largely those who no longer work for you.

**DIRECTOR** Indeed. I knew instantly that you have quick mind.

**CLERK** Is that all?

**DIRECTOR** Not at all. The people who used to work for me, would use everything, even fables, to hurt me, to hurt the nation.

**CLERK** And who would be that, so I know? How about giving me a name list?

**DIRECTOR** You will no doubt find by yourself.

**CLERK** I sure will.

**DIRECTOR** Don't worry, the doctor will be here soon. Remember, speak only to the right people and your review will head in the right direction. By the way, how is your sister?

*Director doesn't wait for the answer and leaves. Doctor arrives soon afterwards.*

**DOCTOR** Is he gone yet?

**CLERK** Yes. Have you been hiding from him?

**DOCTOR** No. First, we had a very cordial conversation. Only then I preferred to stay behind. You did pretty well.

**CLERK** How do you mean?

**DOCTOR** Well, let's say that, when I didn't hear yelling, I wasn't sure you finished.

**CLERK** Teasing me again?

**DOCTOR** Will it help you if I say "Yes"? A drink?

**CLERK** No. You know what this is, don't you? (*pulls out his file*)

**DOCTOR** I sure do. I even know who gave it to you. So, stop playing Columbo.

**CLERK** I can't investigate like Columbo: haven't got the wife to speak of ...

**DOCTOR** Such neat character you're acquiring!

**CLERK** Can we be serious for change?!

**DOCTOR** Haven't tried that for some time. But give me some time. When the line on the bottle is here, I might get serious

**CLERK** Stop it!

**DOCTOR** Seriously, I'm out of bottles.

*Clerk takes away the bottle.*

**DOCTOR** If you want a sip too, all it takes is to ask. I'll be happy to share.

**CLERK** Enough. I want to know whether the records are accurate.

**DOCTOR** We both know they are.

**CLERK** Will you put it in writing?

**DOCTOR** We both know I won't.

**CLERK** Why, for goodness' sake?

**DOCTOR** So sweet how green you are.

**CLERK** I'm not naïve. I only want to help you. For if the pollution keeps rising, it will gradually kill you all.

**DOCTOR** As long as it doesn't get any worse than that.

**CLERK** Worse?

**DOCTOR** You know, there is something that's not in the files. When they closed the coal-fuelled power plant, they built a communal waste incinerator to remedy the losses at least somewhat. It further increased the emissions. And that, in turn, raised the morbidity.

**CLERK** How come the incinerator got a green light?

**DOCTOR** The same way the current approval of the subsidies to the mining went ahead. When god closes the door, he opens a window.

**CLERK** I find your interpretation somewhat distasteful. It will only get through over my dead body.

**DOCTOR** Careful what you wish for. The director has friends in high places. Actually, I'm quite puzzled that the Ministry sent someone like you. Anyway, the outcome will be the same. Or worse. The incinerator is now turned off, though only until needs arise ...

**CLERK** You might have given up. But I won't.

**DOCTOR** If not you, someone else will arrive who'll give it the green light. Have no illusions. Why do you think the incinerator that adulterated the environment more than the power plant kept running for so long?

*Clerk, sitting on the chair, merely stares forward for a while.*

**CLERK** Tell me something. Why did you sign the study?

**DOCTOR** Because I got an offer that was hard to turn down.

**CLERK** I see.

**DOCTOR** You don't.

**CLERK** Never mind. We all need money and one's got to feed the family.

**DOCTOR** You don't get anything. The director doesn't give bribes, he's too greedy for that.

**CLERK** Why then?

**DOCTOR** There's this village. Nearby. It sits on a mining field. Once the mine opens, it would have devastating effect on the plots.

**CLERK** He gave you his word that he wouldn't open it. No one knows. That's why she wouldn't speak with you.

**DOCTOR** It's a bit more complicated.

*Clerk takes the bottle and a glass, pours one for Doctor and them himself.*

**CLERK** Try.

**DOCTOR** She stood up to him, stuck by her principles. All she got in return, was contempt, disdain and ridicule. I tried to do something right and sacrificed my belief. Now we envy each other.

**CLERK** Envy?

**DOCTOR** No one can serve two masters. You either end up hating one and loving the other, or will stick to one and have contempt for the other. I know, sounds insane, but ...

*Clerk merely smiles and pours a glass again pours one for Doctor and himself.*

## Scene 9

*Clerk is walking down the street, everyone is looking at him, chatting so that he would hear.*

### PEOPLE ON THE STREET

He's still here. Anyone heard what it is he wants to do?

No, but I got this nasty gut feeling. What if they do close the mines?

How many will lose their jobs. So, what if there's a drop of arsenic in the water?!

Right.

That mustn't happen. Someone's got to stop it.

The director might manage.

We should help him somehow.

We've got to stick together, like the real miners.

Have you worked in the mine?

No. Why?

Each of us is a miner at heart.

My cousin has an acquaintance whose father has a brother who knows someone working in the mine.

Better leave things the way they are. What if they get worse?

*Director approaches Clerk.*

**DIRECTOR** How are things, my friend? Have you come to your senses yet?

**CLERK** I'm not aware of having lost them.

**DIRECTOR** You know what I meant.

**CLERK** So I should give a green light to reopening of the mines, and ignore everything but your profit.

**DIRECTOR** I do it all for the common good. Ask and you get! Seek and you find! Knock and they open! *(to everyone around)* Am I right?

**PEOPLE ON THE STREET**

Yes, good talk.

The mines are our life.

We all make living of them. And you want to deprive us of our money.

**DIRECTOR** You see.

**CLERK** You've manipulated them. Yet the truth is that all you care about is your profit.

**DIRECTOR** You're being unfair to me. All I care about is the people.

**CLERK** No. Else the mines would be closed. You keep poisoning their air by burning poor coal. Some might lose their homes once you dig a shaft beneath their plot. Are they aware of that?

**PEOPLE ON THE STREET**

What did he say?

He's offending our coal. Saying it's poor quality.

What does he know.

Hipster from Bratislava.

Right, city sleeker.

Shame on him!

**DIRECTOR** Your information is wrong. *(gives him a mocking smile)*

**CLERK** Yeah, right.

**DIRECTOR** I know you're upset about me and don't think much of me. But I'd like to make peace. *(hands him a packet wrapped in aluminium foil)* Small token from our barbeque party.

**CLERK** No thank you.

**DIRECTOR** No problem if you happen to be a vegetarian: it's just got a tiny bit of ... how to put it ... green leaves.

**CLERK** I do know what's in it and I don't want any of it. You must be kidding trying to bribe me like this, straight on the street.

**DIRECTOR** Don't be a drama queen. You should take it.

**CLERK** The only place I can take it to, is the police station.

**DIRECTOR** You can try, though I've been there already.

**CLERK** You can be sure it won't do the trick with me.

**DIRECTOR** You should think it over. What you're doing will point... what's the word ... ah, right ... pointlessly polarise the public.

**CLERK** You're incredible.

**DIRECTOR** Thank you.

**CLERK** That wasn't a compliment.

**DIRECTOR** I know.

**CLERK** I'll finish the report this week and will file it with the Ministry.

**DIRECTOR** I wouldn't do it if I were you.

**CLERK** Are you threatening me?

**DIRECTOR** Only trying to give you an advice. If you file it, then ...

**CLERK** Then what? Will you send that inept lackey of yours after me?! What will he do? Beat me up or what?

**DIRECTOR** Don't be ridiculous. Why do I always get away with everything? Because I have friends in the right places.

**CLERK** Still, it happened to be me they sent here.

**DIRECTOR** Easy to fix. Look, you've got two options. You'll either take this neat doggie bag, give a green light to our mining and everyone will be happy.

**CLERK** Except for those who will continue suffering from all kinds of respiratory conditions.

**DIRECTOR** So what? No one cares.

### **PEOPLE ON THE STREET**

Did you hear that we get more sick if the mines remain open?

When did he say that? Never heard such thing.

Well, respiratory conditions.

And what's that? Haven't heard of that either.

Will we have pulmonary diseases?

Pulmonary?

Lungs. That I understood. And the director –doesn't he care?



He surely didn't mean it.

Hope so.

**CLERK** And the other option?

**DIRECTOR** I thought the first one was convincing enough. Never mind. Your second option, is that I'll make a few calls, you get discharged ... and, if I am in a happy mood, you merely get relocated instead of being sacked.

**CLERK** Go ahead, ring whomever you wish. I'm not afraid.

**DIRECTOR** Why on earth do you do this? These people couldn't care less about you. Most of them even stand against you. If I flicked my fingers, they'd lynch you.

**CLERK** You might be right, but I don't care about them.

### **PEOPLE ON THE FAIR**

We might have been wrong about him.

Don't think so.

What if he's right?

And what if not? Wanna risk it?

Perhaps we should.

Better leave things the way they are. What if they get worse?

**DIRECTOR** You're pathetic, my friend.

**CLERK** Perhaps. Yet I'd rather be pathetic than cynical like you. You only care about yourself. Therefore, you shouldn't be in the executive post at all.

**DIRECTOR** Funny, for that is precisely what got me there.

**CLERK** More blue than rosy ...

**DIRECTOR** It depends.

**CLERK** This conversation is to no avail. Got plenty to do. (*leaves*)

**DIRECTOR** You'll be sorry! (*leaves, too*)

## **Scene 10**

**CLERK** It's always hard to accept the first bribe. It gets easier over time. For who doesn't steal from the others, deprives his own. And a bribe isn't actually a bribe, just a token of appreciation. When it comes to stripping ourselves of accusations, we're quite creative. Well, that's human.

Have I had clean hands all my life? No. Impossible. But I'm trying to. Some say it's not enough? Sometimes perhaps it is enough.

### Scene 11

*Woman enters Doctor's office. With him nowhere in sight, she walks on to the rear room, throws on the desk the documents she's been carrying. Clerk enters shortly afterwards, looking worn out, walking slowly, looking around the room for Doctor.*

**CLERK** Doctor! Are you here?

*Clerk looks around once again, notices Doctor's clothes laid on the chair and walks towards them. He spots the documents on the desk and starts reading through. Woman walks out of the rear room.*

**CLERK** What's this?

**WOMAN** How am I to know. It's not my office?!

**CLERK** Where's the doctor? Well, where is he? Back there?

*Woman is silent, Doctor walks out of the rear room.*

**CLERK** What's this, Doc?

**WOMAN** I thought you'd left the town already. I heard you were discharged from the review.

**CLERK** Yes, you heard right. What's this?

**WOMAN** So, what are you doing here?

**CLERK** Trying to help.

**WOMAN** How if you are no longer in charge?

**CLERK** Am I in your way? I thought you wanted to help.

**WOMAN** I did, but it was back when you had a chance to change things.

**CLERK** I may be on leave, but I still can help you somehow. I know how things are at the Ministry. And if you tell the truth about what happened years ago, then things can get in motion again.

**DOCTOR** They'll appoint a new clerk who will check it all out.

**CLERK** Well, he might be of help, too. I know plenty of good people there.

**DOCTOR** This time it might be a kindred soul.

**CLERK** How can you tell?

**WOMAN** Because they'll make sure it's the case now.

**CLERK** So what are you doing here? When I first saw you, I thought you wanted to make a deal about how to proceed to make sure things get moving at last.

**WOMAN** They did indeed, though somewhat in a different direction.

**CLERK** What do you mean different? What's going on?

**DOCTOR** You really have no clue? You're no green ... You must realise what it is the director is after. You bet he gets it even if over dead bodies.

**CLERK** And what's this? It looks a bit like that study of yours about health impact of the mining that set everything in motion.

**DOCTOR** It's not the one.

**CLERK** I can tell. It's dated yesterday.

**WOMAN** I better go.

**CLERK** Don't you know?

**WOMAN** Doesn't matter.

**CLERK** It does!

**WOMAN** How so? There's no difference whether I know. It doesn't matter at all.

**CLERK** But the mines stripped you of everything.

**WOMAN** Indeed. And now, when I no longer have to be on bread and water, I'm not going to let anyone do the same to me.

**CLERK** My point. I want to help and prevent it from happening again.

**WOMAN** How would you like to go about it? They say you're on leave. How long for?

**CLERK** No sure yet.

**WOMAN** Right! I know the looks. Is that paid leave or unpaid? Ultimately, though, it doesn't matter. We all know what comes next.

**DOCTOR** Do you remember what I told you at the fair? Willow tree is a pretty tree.

**WOMAN** And you should be wise at last and make the right decision for once!

*Woman takes the papers from Clerk, hands them to Doctor and leaves.*

**CLERK** Now I don't understand anything at all.

**DOCTOR** Frankly? Me neither? That's how things are. The last will be first and the first will be last.

**CLERK** The document – is it what I think it is?

**DOCTOR** Yeah.

**CLERK** I see. You wouldn't even look at me.

**DOCTOR** See the full bottle? Once it's almost empty, then I can perhaps handle it.

**CLERK** But then there will be nothing left in the eyes.

**DOCTOR** Right.

*Doctor wants to leave with the bottle in hand.*

**CLERK** Doc, you forgot your papers!

**DOCTOR** Did it ever occur to you that I might not want to sign them? That I no longer want to keep running away from myself?

**CLERK** If you don't want to sign them, what was she doing here?

**DOCTOR** No one can serve two masters. You know, they're about to open a new mining field.

**CLERK** Déjà vu. And she lives on top of it.

**DOCTOR** We all live on top of it.

*Doctor retreats to the back, Clerk is left alone. Sudden change in lighting, everything around is flashing, roaring as in delirium, only Clerk remains motionless. Suddenly he finds himself on the street with people.*

### **Scene 13**

#### **PEOPLE**

Can you see him? He looks awful.

Something must be going on with him?

He does look dreadful; drunk perhaps.

Doesn't seem to be drunk.

**CLERK** Where am I?

**PEOPLE**

I told you he's drunk. Happens to me sometimes, too. He'll sleep it off.

Perhaps he's been drugged.

Revolting!

Booze may be the broom of the mankind, but it's ours at least.

**CLERK** Goodness, people, I'm so glad to see you.

**PEOPLE**

Does he bite?

Why would he do something like that?!

What if he does? What if he's got rabies?

**CLERK** No need to worry, I'm here to help.

**PEOPLE**

Everyone always says so.

Still, perhaps he did come to help.

Drugged like this?

What if he's just sick?

Perhaps we should help him.

And then he might help us.

*Then Director mingles in the crowd – until then he stood in the rear, behind the people.*

**DIRECTOR** What if he only uses you for his own good?!

**PEOPLE**

True, that can happen easily.

And if he doesn't and really wants to help us somehow?

What do we need help with anyway?!

The mines might be damaging to us after all.

**DIRECTOR** I've always given you good advice. You had all information first-hand. You can always trust me and not a stranger stripped of any capacity to change things.

**PEOPLE**

what did I say? Something's wrong here.

When?

Then.

Stop the nonsense.

And how do you intend to help us since you no longer work there?

**CLERK** I'll help you put together all the paperwork. All it takes is you telling me the truth and we can win.

**PEOPLE**

Could he really?

Perhaps so. Given he's been working there long enough.

But what if it doesn't work out? What will we do then?

**DIRECTOR** Nothing. You'll do nothing at all. You'll only do well with me.

**CLERK** People help me and then I can help you.

*Director emerges from behind the crowd.*

**DIRECTOR** Help yourself, for I won't and none of them will help either.

**CLERK** But why?

**DIRECTOR** Because I say so.

**CLERK** Don't let him push you in the corner. You're strong together, I know so.

**DIRECTOR** That will never happen and I'll enjoy toasting you.

*Director faces Clerk confidently, none of the people say a word; they stand together with heads bent. Sudden change in lighting, everything around Clerk is flashing, roaring like in delirium, eventually the lights go off. When they come back on again, Clerk stands alone smiling tenderly.*

## **Epilogue**

**CLERK** The story is drawing to its end. Yes, I realise you're still missing a lot of answers. Yet I don't know whether I can answer everything. Those will give you some answers.

*People enter, including Woman and Doctor.*

**WOMAN** Perhaps I should've been more careful back then.

**DOCTOR** No, I should have done more. Do you know what happened, yet?

**WOMAN** No.

**PEOPLE ON THE STREET**

Have you heard?

Yes, it's curious.

I wouldn't have guessed. He was so young.

Although he came to close the mines, pity to lose him.

**WOMAN** What shall we do now?

**DOCTOR** The same we should've done back then: collaborate.

*Doctor and Woman are leaving together.*

**PEOPLE ON THE STREET**

I'm not sorry for him.

How can you say such thing?

It's a tragedy, certainly. But he was asking for trouble.

What if it wasn't an accident?

Nonsense. It was his fault.

What if he died because he wanted to close the mines, and the Director may be behind it?

**CLERK** I better correct it a bit, as it's starting to sound like conspiracy. No, it's nothing to do with the Director. At least I think so. I died in sleep. There was no reason to die. He wanted to toy with me some more. The day I died, I received news from my supervisor. They sacked me. When I wanted to tell them about everything I came across, they told me they wouldn't take it into account anyway, because I was biased. When I asked why, I received no answer. Back to my death. As far as I know, no external cause had been confirmed. Yes, we can object, for people are prone to fraud. Still, we must trust evidence, for it conceals the truth. I have my own theory. I shall help myself using the doctor's words: Man is like a tree in the storm. You either bend or the storm breaks your back. Still, if you keep bending long enough, it breaks you anyway. Though when I look back ...

*Doctor and Woman arrive from behind Clerk, carrying sheets of paper to be signed. They grow surrounded by People.*

**WOMAN** Would you sign our petition to stop the mining and coal burning.

**DOCTOR** It's gradually killing us all. The volume of respiratory diseases is rising; it is only bound to get worse.

**PEOPLE ON THE STREET**

Yeah, we'll sure trust a traitor and drunkard!

They might be right, we should hear them out.

Never! One doesn't speak to traitors. After all, it doesn't have to be connected.

How do you want to look your relatives in the eye, if you want to take away their jobs?

Shame!

Shame, shame, shame ...!

*Only a handful people leave shouting "Shame". The others start signing the petition, gradually everyone leaves, only Clerk remains.*

**CLERK** ... There will always be hope, perhaps.

A few days ago, the Director asked me why I was helping the people, even though they kept attacking me. Yet, the most frequent voices in the crowd are those of hatred and fear, while others remain silent or silenced. Though all they need, is an impulse that gives them the power to stand for what's right and what we believe in.

This takes us to the question I raised at the very beginning: Why have I come here today? It's simple. I just wanted to beg you: don't let the crowd silence you.

**The End**