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Help the Aged

Jason Crow
Grand Valley State University

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Help the Aged

JASON CROW

A little man named Jrlka (yerlkah) wears a bright orange vest underneath a dingy old parka to stay safe and warm. He is street sweeper on the Charles Bridge in Prague. Prague is in the Czech Republic. Stalin used to own the Czech Republic. Now they are free. And so is Jrlka.

Jrlka walks a little funny (bobbing back and forth somewhat like a penguin) and when he smiles, his tongue starts to appear. He has no teeth. His sweater hangs loose from his arms and

his neck, exposing his grub stained tee shirt. One night while doing his usual routine of changing the wastepaper baskets on Karlova Street, which is the street that runs across the Charles Bridge, he found himself intrigued. What could two young men be doing at four in the morning at the foot of Jesus? Why were they drinking wine?

He approached the two individuals seated casually under the crucifixion, which was coincidentally sculpted by a young man not too much older than these two young fellas, and asked them in a harsh and biting Czech accent that sounded more like Russian, (i believe he imagined he was some sort of Russian dictator, that this bridge he swept, the street he cleaned was somehow his, by right of caretaker) "What are boys doing drinking and smoking under my Jesus?"

"What?" the young man asked, startled by his comprehension of Czech despite his drunkenness.

"Take those bottles and put them in the wastepaper basket." he said.

“No, no,” Jrlka replied. “The little mother is sacred and so is my bridge. I feel no remorse for you children. Still! Stay still!”

The young men went about drinking their wine not paying attention to the old man’s incomprehensible ranting. The old man continued until finally, in a moment of heightened frustration and desperation, Jrlka grabbed the older of the two young men and pleaded to him.

“Do you understand?” he said. “Jesus has me sweep the floor of this bridge every night! I pickup empty bottles of wine, and cigarette butts, and i must empty these full bins...” and on and on he went pausing momentarily to tug at the shirt of the older young man. Then finally, he took off his bright orange vest and laid down his dirty old broom. He grabbed the older young man by the arm and told him to spread his arms out like a bird. Then, in some sort of quasi-religious ritual he placed the vest on the young man, sliding one arm in at a time, his face shrinking and expanding like a balloon (due to the lack of teeth) as he concentrated on providing this young man with his orange vest.

The young man paused for a moment and looked at what he had just donned. Jrlka stood only a meter away staring into the eyes of the young man. Then, the other younger man, still sitting and drinking at the chiseled feet of Jesus stood up and took out his camera. He snapped three quick shots. The camera clicked.

And in the time that it took for those three flashes to go off, the older young man saw exactly where he was. He could see Jrlka, as he was. Click. And in the time it took for the second flash to go off the Charles bridge upon which he stood opened up from the middle, splitting and folding back, and emerging from the womb-like opening was three hundred Swedish men, fighting and drinking and pillaging the streets of Prague. Then came the Habsburgs like mighty kings every single one of them royal and just and walking straight towards Jrlka with compassion. Then came Saint John of Napomuk, with five stars gleaming bands of fluorescent light oscillating above his head in a halo, his tongue was mutilated, his eyes gouged out, and hands bound together as he walked towards Jrlka and then stood among

the others on the sides of the bridge. Then came Charles IV, his clothes the texture of satin, and his eyes were dream-like and wise, his entire Holy Roman Empire was spread out behind him in formation, like a superbowl marching band. The camera clicked for a second time.

The whole lot of them stood there staring at Jrlka and the young man who was still wearing the vest and wondering what is was he supposed to do with it. By the third flash, Jrlka was crying. He wept for the young man who could see the past as he once did. He wept for the young man knowing that this moment of clarity would last only for a time, that it would be fleeting and all encompassing, but soon, he too, like Jrlka, would grow old and loose his teeth. Jrlka wept because he knew the young man would never be a true artist like him, and like Andrew Wyeth, like James Joyce, like Michaelangelo, like the sad Joseph Cornell, the young man would never be a street sweeper for Vaclav Havel, the president, and for all the foreigners who strolled these ancient grounds.

As Jrlka wept, the young man started to take the vest off. He handed the vest to Jrlka and began to weep himself.