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English

Homework: Use Your Character Portrait to Craft a Story, Placing Your Character in a Very Deliberate Physical and Historical Setting

These Talking Walls

Chapter 1 – Arno Svoboda

I stepped from the bus onto the campus grounds. The building was magnificent, a 14th century brick-and-stone structure that was reminiscent of one of the old British buildings that Lisle would occasionally talk about in depth. I ran my hand along the ancient red brick at the base of one of the pillars, feeling the rough, cold stone rub against my fingers. The vast array of forward-facing windows glittered in the bright sun of the early afternoon, and as I approached the strong, heavy wooden door to enter, for a moment I was lost in awe of the architectural prowess of the past. Too bad we would never be able to build anything like this with our current government...

“Arno!” Boomed across the courtyard, snapping me out of my thoughts. “Arno! Over here my good man!” It was the Professor. His voice was sure and loud. It held a hard Czech accent when speaking English, and held a tuneful English accent when speaking Czech. He was truly a man of great contrast. He was a man of above average size, 6 foot 1, with shortly cropped, dark brown hair and a wild, bushy beard that seemed to wrap around his face the way an especially angry ferret would a foe. His face itself was pale, with blemishes concentrated on the temples and both smile and frown wrinkles on his forehead and cheeks, respectively. His wide eyes held strong green irises that glinted with the confidence and euphoria that came with excessive alcohol consumption. He wore a scuffed and worn black suit, with a freshly cleaned, folded purple velvet cloth tucked into his lapel. His shoes were freshly polished, as per usual. He believed that one was able to determine the exact mental and physical state of a person by the state of their shoes, so tried his hardest to differ the look and feel of his own every day, without fail.

“Arno!” He called once again, and I turned to face him. “Where have you been lad? Why did I not see you at the SSM Protest last night?” He asked accusingly, gesturing wildly with one hand and clinging to a pillar with the other. “You do know, Professor, that a young man such as myself does usually have preoccupations, other than politics and learning.” I replied, grinning my signature white-toothed grin at him.

“Codswallop! Gobbledegook! Not a man worth the ground he walks on has any other preoccupation than politics!” He shouted, gaining for a brief moment the attention of a student he had been leering at. He slumped further onto the pillar, seeming as if he was about to pass out. He breathed heavily, and I felt the scent of the cheap gin he had been

guzzling infiltrate my nostrils, and the warm air he had been breathing condense on my face.

"Is it true, about the dead student?" I asked hopefully, genuinely wanting to know if the press was right. "Ah... these talking walls... always telling everyone falsehoods." The Professor chuckled, before promptly losing consciousness.

"Let's get you to your office, professor," I said gently, disappointed. I took his arm, and hoisted it onto my shoulders. I smelt the mix of expensive cologne and fermenting sweat as he lurched onto me for support. I had come to this 'prestigious place of learning' to chase a dream of becoming an academic or a scholar, but had never really had the welly to study or practise hard, so was only average in my subjects. Instead, as long as my parents continue to pay for my further education, I decided to pretend to be a budding socialite, fraternising with the learned and the powerful. There are very few rich.

To my left, almost hiding behind yet another pillar in an attempt to get out of helping the Professor up the multiple flights of stair in this wretched place, was Pierre. He was young, barely 18 years old, but was one of those people with the appearance of the perpetually middle aged. He was chubby, without being fat; rounded, without being overweight. Whilst he would never be described as muscle-bound, he would never be obese either. His orange-ginger hair, unusual in a Frenchman, was already thinning at the crown and around the sides, the promise of a bald patch to come. He had a pair of grey-green eyes which looked out from within a face moulded by a busy sculptor from rather wet clay. His grey trouser legs were rolled up in a manner to discourage enquiry, and he wore a tatty tweed jacket that I had never seen him out of regardless of the time of year. He once claimed that the rolled up legs were in aid of cycling, but I knew that was untrue as nothing wheeled was going to get through the blocked Prague streets at the times when he was active.

He spoke only basic pigeon Czech, so we had to converse mainly in his native French, which luckily I was fluent in from many a summer spent in Monaco. "Hey! Pierre! Get over here and help me get this drunkard to his suite!" I called as he turned to run away. His shoulders slumped as he realised that he had been spotted, and trudged over to me to take the Professor's other arm.

Suddenly, as soon as the Professor was secured, there was a presence behind us.

His name was Edward Lisle. He was a journalist who lived near the University, and was a close friend of the professor. We grew to respect him, even despite his many flaws.

He was a little man, about 5 foot 8, but held himself in an upright manner that made him seem taller. Serious eyes. A mouth with no smile lines. A single pox scar on his left cheek was the only blemish (other than a slight redness of the cheeks) on his face. His chin was rounded, like that of an artist, but his resemblance to Picasso stopped there. A thin, light brown moustache sat atop his lip, and his hair struggled against the inevitable process of aging, slowly turning from a beige-y brown to a light grey but still retaining its mousy texture.

His penchant for blandness was startling on first seeing him, a loose, light brown pullover combined with grey slacks and faded dress shoes that bore the wear and tear of 15 years of containing the too small, walking feet of a man forgotten by life. He had the upper-middle class accent of a man with aspirations and elocution lessons, which in 20 years would be mocked as the stereotype for all wealthy but stupid British men. One could feel sorry for this little man, striving to be accepted by a portion of society that just ignored him.

He walked purposefully wherever he went, even though it was evident that he had no purpose. In conversation he would stutter ever so slightly and wring his hands as if trying to dry them, whilst his eyes darted between his fellow talker and everywhere else. He had an air of intelligence, but not an air of smartness. He was the type of man who would never marry, not out of choice, but out of circumstance, or would find true, futile happiness with a woman who didn't love him and would leave him devastated and penniless within a year of their marriage.

"Oh... s...sorry boys, seems l...l...like I got here a little t...too late to help...p!" He grinned mischievously and walked behind us.

"Lisle, you bastard, I know you know 'bout this before us," Pierre said in Czech with great difficulty, gesturing to the giant slumped on his shoulders. "S...so what i...i...if I did?" Lisle tested, but Pierre just shook his head and mutter to himself in French.

After fifteen minutes of hardship and various arguments about who should be responsible for taking him back down the stairs, the Professor awoke from his stupor.

Chapter 2 – Journal Entry 1: StB Agent Úskok

Ok, so for official mission documentation reasons, I've been told to keep a journal. StBHQ were very vague as to why, but I am sure it is for a good reason. So far, I've associated myself with Targets A, B and C, and have gone so far as to gain their friendship. I have had 72 official contacts with the Targets. I am writing this in the early afternoon, and am expecting Targets A, B and C to be approaching Location U soon. Will report back after contact no. 73 has occurred.

Ať žije vláda!

Chapter 3 – Arno Svoboda

Decorated in the Professor's eccentric and random style, the room was a fan of the clean-and-white-house-design's nightmare. The walls were panelled with treated dark brown mahogany wood, and pond green paint above that. Fresh, bright yellow paint covered the ceiling of the room, but there were darker yellow patches already. An overhead fan buzzed in the background, and the sickly scent of vomit mixed with sweet, intense incense that was omnipresent in the Professor's suite. I gagged the first time I came in there, but now I am accustomed to the uniqueness of the room.

The Professor awoke from his stupor. "P...P...P...Professor," Lisle purred, stepping closer and taking his hand. "ARNO!" The Professor screamed at the top of his lungs. Lisle leapt back,

raising a single hand as if he was about to be struck. The Professor jumped from the low-slung recliner, but overshot the attempt and ended up crashing headfirst into a bookshelf. Pages and books spewed over the floor like shattered glass and, as he approached to help the Professor, Pierre skidded over on a first edition copy of 'The Communist Manifesto' by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. I straightened my tie and cautiously, apprehensively, approached.

The Professor lay in a star-like position, with Pierre's head touching his right hand. I stepped over the books, and offered my hand to the fallen. Lisle assisted Pierre, and I helped the Professor up.

"Now, to business," the professor stepped forth and grabbed an open bottle of expensive wine from his desk. "I presume you have all heard about the dead student?" He looked around, man to man, examining the faces of each of us individually, devoid of any expression. "I just want to clarify... there is no dead student. One must always ignore what these talking walls, these holes in our organisation that allow information out, say. No matter the evidence – what these unfortunate leaks say is not true. Always." The Professor took a large swig from the bottle, before passing it to Lisle.

Lisle drank heavily, taking two long gulps, before passing it on to Pierre. Pierre took only a small sip, and passed it onto me. I wiped the head of the bottle, and raised it to my lips. The wine was red, vinegary and acidic. I hated it. I coughed and handed the now almost empty bottle back to the Professor. This drinking cycle continued for a good 3 bottles of miscellaneous alcohol, all foul, until the Professor was once again endlessly drunk.

"Gentlemen!" He said with a flourish, raising his hands as if trying to hold a man above his head. "Gentlemen!" He exclaimed again.

"Gentlemen!" A third time. He pulled a bottle from his desk. "Today, we drink, as we have drunk. Why? We drink to life." He poured a glass of whisky. Another bottle. "We drink to death." He poured a glass of gin. Yet another bottle. "We drink... to freedom!" He poured a glass of vodka.

"Pick your poison gentlemen, as next time we drink like this, it will be as free men of Czechoslovakia. Free from the regime that is oppressing our spirits, our words, our thoughts. Free from the men that are forcefully watching our every move. Free from the bastards that will ruin our children's future. I feel that today we must fight for our freedom. Today, not tomorrow, not later, NOW! For if we do not free ourselves, it will only be our children dying in the streets to make our old age better. So do not fear the forceful minority in our revolution. Do not fear the men on the streets that will give their lives for a false cause. Do not pity the weak and stupid followers of the ideology-driven shark that feeds on our collective interior, taking, stealing, what is not theirs in the name of equality. Let us force our way out of the slums we are made to live in into the streets, into the palaces where our enemy sits atop their thrones made from the bones of our fathers and the fresh corpses of our friends who dared to speak the truth. The time has come to rise against our oppressors. Today we will send a message to our arrogant leaders. We. Will. Be. Free. Or we will die trying."

We cheered, riled partly by the Professor's speech, and partly by the vulgar alcohol that we guzzled thirstily. Richard was already involved in the 'Velvet Revolution', as the media has decided to call it, so it fell to Pierre and I to pledge allegiance, and promise to be at the next protest. Whilst Pierre was more reserved quietly nodding and drinking in sips, I wholeheartedly admitted to hating the regime and promised to fight until I died for our country's freedom.

Chapter 4 – Journal Entry 2: StB Agent Úskok

Once again, my acting was a masterclass. They didn't even know I was faking it. I had them in a secluded room, and Target A, B and C let slip some very compromising secrets whilst under the influence of drink. If those secrets were to fall into the wrong hands, I'm sure they would be in *very* big trouble. I've already relayed my mission's report and findings to StBHQ, so hopefully the Velvet Revolution will be crushed very soon. As long as the Communist Regime is in power, I am safe from prosecution. I can do anything.

Ať žije vláda!

Chapter 5 – Arno Svoboda

The day was November 19th. The next scheduled demonstration. Yesterday, the Theatres went on strike, so the filthy communists were going to be touchy. I stepped from my accommodation, a bag containing the clothes that I was going to wear in my hand. I walked over to the university. The buildings towered over the road, but I felt somewhat safe amongst the skyscrapers and cafés that have started to appear in abundance on our city streets. I ran my hand through my hair. It was tangled and greasy, but I'd be wearing a balaclava helmet, so it was ok. I looked into each shopfront as I sauntered past. Every one sold something different, something unique. I've hear rumours from the east that the Commies in the USSR have stopped individual ownership of everything, and everything you could possibly touch is owned by the state. That will never happen here, as long as I live, I thought with surprising hostility as I approached the Professor's chosen gathering place. It was going to be an 'impromptu demonstration', with protestors coming from many safe houses and gathering outside the Prague Castle, where the striking Theatres are located. I knocked on the door. Rata-tat-tat.

The Professor opened the door. "I assume you're here for the protest?" he guessed correctly. I smiled, "How did you know?"

"A young man only wants three things: food, sex and fun. If you wanted food, you could have stopped off at any of these new, bastard cafés, and I very much hope you didn't come to me looking for sex, so therefore I have to assume you came to me for fun."

I looked at him, trying to detect even a hint of joking on his face. Nope: he was serious. Pierre and Lisle were already there, with two dozen others who I vaguely remembered from Uni. Past that, the preparation was a rush. Changing, preparing, the pretty girl with the

bleached blond hair smiling at me. Pierre quietly confessing his fear to me. Lisle loudly introducing me to two men of roughly the same age as the Professor. Another riling, if less passionate, speech from the man himself. Putting on the black leather gloves. Pulling the blue balaclava over my head. Leaving the safe house.

First, we were a small band of about 30 and the armed escort that watched over us, daring us to try something, actually outnumbered us as we marched into a main street. Onlookers sniggered and commented that the Velvet Revolution was on its last legs, already. Curtains were drawn but full blown laughter emanated from the pro-communist households. 'One must always ignore these talking walls...' I remembered the Professor's saying. Ignore the disbelievers. Our freedom will be worth the mockery we have endured. Suddenly, more bodies piled out of an alley that led to the tube station, and kept coming. From behind hundreds suddenly piled in, waving banners and shouting anti-government and anti-communist slogans. The Professor's careful and sophisticated planning had made a mockery of the government's attempt to control our protest. There were more protestors than pavement and people spilled into the road and mingled with the crawling traffic. Horns blared, but the protestors continued to spread until they took up the entire street.

I pushed past an especially large youth to join the front of the line. Pierre, the Professor and two others (all, incidentally, dressed like me) had grasped onto each other's hands to form a chain, and I joined willingly on the end.

We now dwarfed our military escort, and even though they had the superior firepower, they didn't want to lash out for fear of starting a violent uprising. I was high on adrenaline and confidence as we stepped out onto the open plaza, nearing our end goal of the Theatres. The plaza itself was a thing of pride and beauty. Light grey concrete with decorative mosaics and tile placed in patterns along the sides, and into a spiral in the middle. We soon flooded the plaza, pushing casual shoppers off of our turf and chanting slogans promising peace and capitalism.

We didn't even see them coming.

Chapter 6: Journal Entry 3: StB Agent Úskok

Today, we have done a good thing. It was glorious. They entered our city's beautiful, esteemed plaza like a tidal wave, pushing out further and further. They didn't even see it coming. Helicopters worth of the StB's best officer's zip lined down, onto the exterior of the crowds, and began bashing their riot shields with their batons. The symphony of screams, running and bashing illuminated the air like lightning, as the great communist government showed their might against our feeble foe.

The students had no morale, no will, no fighting spirit, and ran like the frightened, out of their depth children they are. One of two tried to fight, but were struck down and beaten for their insolence. Targets A, B and C were able to escape, but I was with them and made certain to note down both the safe house we left, and the one we arrived at.

I now have solid evidence and basis to arrest all the scum Targets, but StBHQ are trying to get some more information on Havel and the other rebel leadership.

Ať žije vláda!

Chapter 7: Arno Svoboda

We escaped to a different safe house, as per the Professor's instructions. Lisle, Pierre and two other escapees left at 30 minute intervals, after burning all their protest clothes in the fireplace and changing into casual but smart attire. Only the Professor and I were left waiting.

The room was dark, a problem when the only lighting you have is a fireplace and a gas lamp, and it smelled of damp. I looked around. The faux-original painting on the walls showed that the previous occupant had *some* taste, but the beige carpet and dark purple walls begged to differ. The chairs were covered in a white plastic sheet, and everything was unplugged, which was typical of a careful owner who would not be returning for a long time. This place had been targeted by burglars more than once, judging by the shattered glass, boarded up windows and complete lack of anything of any value apart from some very large, very heavy items such as a fridge.

"How did it go wrong?" I asked, willing him to come up with something revolutionary.

"My boy. There is but one explanation." He smiled slightly, but a hint of bitterness crept into his voice. "These god-damned, secretive Talking Walls." I almost laughed out loud. Almost. But he continued before I started to grin. "They knew we were coming. They knew where we coming from. They knew when and why." He frowned, and calmly stood up. "These talking walls will be the death of us."

Chapter 8: Journal Entry 4: StB Agent Úskok

Ha! The order has arrived. I am to arrest Targets A, B and C in the name of peace. These scoundrels will no longer roam the streets, disrupting the lives of our proper, normal communist citizens.

Today has been a good day. The crushed defeated Velvets will definitely surrender after the arrest of one of their most famous members!

Ať žije vláda!

Chapter 9: Arno Svoboda

I shifted from the comfortable position I found myself in. Blasted door. Always slamming during the night. *Wait.*

They burst into the room, smashing open the door and pulling me upright. I felt a gloved fist smash into my abdomen, and a masked face look me in the eyes.

"This is the one!" I remembered the voice from somewhere, but in my state of semi-awareness I couldn't put a name to the eyes.

Another punch plunged me into blackness.

When I awoke, Pierre was sitting in the corner, staring at me. The cell floor was cold concrete. It smelled like old urine and damp. My head was rested on an alcohol and faeces soaked mattress, and the only light in the room came from a window so small I could barely fit my hand through it. Pierre seemed to be in a trance, and his ginger hair was flecked with red specks of blood that originated from his busted nose. He had a large bruise on his left cheek, and a fresh scar on his forehead. *What happened?*

Pierre spoke up. "Lisle is already gone. So is the Professor." I felt my stomach drop in a sensation comparable to the feeling of falling whilst on a theme park ride.

"The Professor... is gone?" I shuddered at the thought. How? Why? Who? Who had betrayed us?

There was a knock at our jail door. "Oi. You. No talking." The guard snapped at us. His face was pale from too many a day spent watching rebellious criminals, and today was no different.

Two large lock clicked open and another miscellaneous guard entered the room, wrapped in military fatigues and a heavy coat with highly polished combat boots. I examined the new guard's features intensely. His face was exquisite. He was, like his predecessor, too pale to be desirable, but his medium-sized forehead (free from blemish or mark) and arching roman senator's nose showed a distinct class divide between the two guards. He turned and exchanged a few words with his companion in muted tones. My ears strained to listen, but my efforts were in vain as they turned to face me.

"Arno Svoboda! Here. NOW!" He barked, in tones that I always had associated with the old aristocracy. I scampered to the door and exchanged one final glance with Pierre. He dealt a baton-blow to the back of my head, blurring my vision and knocking me off of my feet.

My new friend, Guard 2, seized my arm, lifted me, and roughly escorted me down a narrow, straight passage. He finger nails dug into my arm, drawing a hint of blood. I felt fluid trickle down my neck as I stumbled, trying to keep up with the uncompromising speed of the guard. The corridor was cold, dark and damp. I glanced into another cell. A youth of no more than 19 lay slumped, blood streaming from an open, untreated gash in his temple. I recognised the one I had pushed past to join the front of the protest. He wasn't breathing, let alone moving, but a sweet-faced, thin girl crouched next to him, dabbing his wound with a lukewarm-water soaked scrap of cloth. I felt fearful for my next moments. My guard yanked me around a corner, snapping my conscience back to my present. I could see light, coming ever closer. It burned my eyes as we entered into a small, pentagonal courtyard. High red brick walls rose towered over us as he dragged me to the centre of this plaza, a

small, slightly raised oval comprised mainly of a single sheet of slate, with fresh sand and sawdust sprinkled intermittently on the stone.

My guard forced me to my knees, and pulled back my hair to keep my head up. This action invoked a fresh dribble of blood from my head, and I moaned as my scalp slightly tore.

Another guard saluted as a man, seemingly cloaked in darkness, glided towards me. He took a pistol from the holster of the guard, and attached a long, 10 mm silencer. He unloaded the clip from the handle of the weapon, and proceeded to slide the bullets out, one by one, until he came to the last cartridge.

Slide.

...

Clink.

Slide.

...

Clink.

Slide.

...

Clink.

He turned to me, and removed his tatty, bland fedora.

“H...h...hello...A...A...A...Arno.”

And there he was. Edward Lisle, or Agent Úskok as I heard my guard call him. He smiled his signature grin, and I flinched away from this gesture.

Why? Why? Why? My brain begged me to ask him. I never got the chance.

He raised his recently acquired firearm to my head, and I watched the tendons in his finger tighten around the trigger.

“Liar! Cheat! Coward!” I screamed, and he suddenly lowered the gun. I felt tears spring into my eyes as he raised a hand to me, a sure sign of his renewed goodness. The slap stung my face. Pain erupted on my cheek, and my muscles resisted as I was bent to the side by the power of the strike.

He gave me no more time.

He raised a silenced pistol to my head.

Why? I thought.

Then he fired.

Epilogue – Journal Entry X: StB Agen... oh what the hell: Edward Lisle

Three weeks later, the Velvet Revolution ended. The Communist Regime in Czechoslovakia ceased to exist. 41 years of one-party totalitarianist power removed and deposed in a matter of weeks. A month later, Václav Havel, the bastard leader, was officially named president of the country. My country.

Arno's death? Forgotten.

My crimes? Remembered.

I stand in the bathroom and think about my past mistakes. How could I have so faithfully believed in such a flawed system? Still, no matter now, what's done is done. The past forgotten. Or is it?

I look into the mirror, contemplating what I have done. I draw the razor across my face, sweeping rough stubble and watery foam from my now clean-shaven complexion into the fading white sink. Silently, I look down at my hands. Were these the hands that had betrayed my friend? That ended the life of another human for a lost cause?

Yes, I reasoned. They are. Give them another month, and I'll be on trial. Murder.

Disturbance of the peace. Fraternising with a government that wasn't an enemy until they became one. Bastards. I'll be executed, no doubt. It'll be quiet. No glamour. A quick bullet to the head. A bang, and then nothing. I've already done it before, to him. And him. And her. An unmarked grave to be discovered in 20 years, for amateur investigators to ponder, 'Who was this man? What did he do wrong? Oh... he supported the wrong side.'

No.

I threw down my razor like it was red-hot. It clattered onto the floor tiles, leaving a slight black mark and a blunted edge. I angrily opened the door, and slammed it shut again. The entire apartment shuddered from the noise alone.

No! They will not have the pleasure of finishing what they started. I will go out on my own terms.

One day later...

I straightened the jacket of my second-best suit. I am going to be buried in my best one. "Okay..." I sighed to myself. "This is it."

I pulled the jet black, chalky Botulinum pill from my worn top pocket. When one is going to take one's life, why take any chances? I sat down in my chair, my old, stained, beige fabric chair, and inserted the morphine drip into my arm. It was easy enough to get hold of from the hospital, and why should I suffer in my last moments? I refuse to give them even the satisfaction of the smallest victory from my death. I will go out... happily... calmly... and most importantly... on my own terms.

I ensured that the note was on the table beside me, and that my grey, mousy hair was tidy. I remember his last words to me, "Liar! Cheat! Coward!" I chuckled. If the hat fits, wear it. If the title fits, earn it.

I felt the first drops of morphine enter my system. This truly was it. The end. My final salute. "I'm sorry, Arno. I'm truly sorry, old friend." I whispered whilst entering in a warm, calm phase. It wouldn't be long before I was too drugged to do anything.

What was the use in dragging it out? I popped the pill, and crunched it between my teeth. The morphine took hold. I was delirious 'til the end. The walls were talking to me. Talking about me. These talking walls. I laughed, remembering the Professor's quips. These talking walls. These talking walls.

These Talking Walls.

Then it all went black.