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## The Hanging Men from Prague

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# The Hanging Men from Prague

Francisco Díaz Klaassen<sup>1</sup>



Once I saw a man hanging from the ledge of a building. We were in a European city, he and I, although surely he hadn't paid much heed to that detail in all his life. Not even now that he pretended to put such an abrupt end to it. I, however, could not stop thinking that the suicide guy lived in Prague and not elsewhere. He didn't live in Vienna, or in Zagreb or in Sarajevo. He lived in Prague. To me it was quite clear: there had to be something about the city that made men (and women?) miserable. A tragic quality, an oppressive one—one that I was denied to feel, that for

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tourists such as myself was only presented through a veil (somewhat like the spectacle given by a person hanging from a ledge), incapable as we were to experience the anguish exuded by its pores. And yet it was better than nothing.

I stood there watching the hanging man, without knowing what to do—and therefore, doing nothing. I was there for a long while, until I started to feel a vague discomfort in the back of my neck. What was I to do next? An annoying little voice kept telling me that I had to do something. *Help him*. This is what the little voice said.

The truth is that I didn't speak Czech. In the three weeks I had pretended to live in the city, I had barely learned some clumsy (yet surprisingly effective) lines to get women into bed, and some others to avoid the sure beatings I was going to get from their boyfriends (back then, I don't know why, I had a sort of fixation with married women). So, since I couldn't communicate with the guy (unless my immediate pretensions included sleeping with him) I didn't even try. With that excuse I quieted my consciousness, which, as I already said, was constantly trying to force me to act (although, sure enough, the bitch was unwilling to tell me how).

But in reality I stood there watching him because I didn't want to do anything. What I wanted—and I'm inclined to think that you're with me on this one—was to see him fall. To witness that instant in which—I can only imagine—time stands still for a second (like in those silly cartoons one used to watch as a kid) and then advances at its maximum speed, showing me just a flash of colors, a stain, fleeting and undetermined, a stain that then explodes in the floor with a thud, a thud that—again: I can only imagine—will repeat itself, like an echo, in my head, at least a couple of times, at least for a few minutes after the explosion. In other words: I wanted to see *not to see*, in order to be left with the feeling that I had observed a magical thing, and yet that at the same time I had not been able to watch it fully. Would I be capable of retaining the image of the impact, or would it occur so fast that I wouldn't see a thing, that I'd be left feeling a sort of unrest, a strong disappointment, for that which I had missed?

So why kid myself? So why play along with my consciousness, if the bastard never did any favors to me? “Jump!,” I said to the hanging man, excited all of a sudden. “Jump!” I couldn't care less about the language. I assumed I was speaking at that moment a universal one, one that transcended words and which was formed only of ideas, of impulses, stronger and more important than both the hanging man and myself. But he didn't listen to me. He remained a hanging man, as if he were a stoic, apparently alien to all that surrounded him (at least, alien to my presence).

Some time passed and nothing: the guy took it like no one I've ever met. Light began to fade away and with it my strength and my capacity to concentrate (that is to say, my interest in the whole business). My neck screamed something, demanded that I should pay attention to it and, seeing that I didn't, finally forced me to notice it by means of a good hard pull. So, sore—and a bit bored—I kept walking and decided to forget about the hanging man. There will come a time for such a death, I thought. And this thought was my consolation.

So there I was, walking back to the hostel, imagining the future deaths I would witness some day, when I saw a group of people gathered outside a bookshop. Happily, I approached the crowd, willing to share with them my editorial knowledge, when I noticed that they took little interest in the bookshop itself—they were looking at the sky, absorbed in the picture that had been painted by it. I

joined them in resignation (I truly wanted to share my knowledge with them), even though when I did that I felt again the wrath of my neck, previously soothed as I walked.

Another hanging man.



*How long's he been there?*, I asked an old lady, not really convinced that she spoke English at all. *Long. Too long*, she answered, worried. *I see*. And I ran away from there.

As you can imagine, those two weren't the only ones. In each corner I encountered the same thing. The hanging men from Prague.



And then I had an idea. And I went back to the hostel. And I went to the roof. And for a moment I believed I belonged to Prague's anguish, to its oppression. For a moment—why not—I thought I was Kafka himself, a reincarnation that had just taken longer than expected to return to its true origin, to find an acceptable receptacle.

But it was an illusion. I realized that with horror. The illusion of belonging. A bad joke. I knew it when my hands were no longer able to hold on to the ledge, when only a few minutes after I

had gone to the roof of the building I lay dying on the floor, shattered into a thousand different pieces, and some lady was approaching my remains in order to pick them up with a shovel, in order to erase forever the stain my body had left on the floor.

