Awkward Pause

Very late at night in the office, the room is lit by an open laptop, an almost empty whiskey bottle stands next to it. Michael is browsing through pages, reading carefully, yet the reading seems to make him sadder and sadder.

Vanek enters, which makes Michael almost jump. Michael and Vanek stare at each other in silence. Then Michael sighs deeply in acceptance.

VANCE

(looking at Vanek)

Extraordinary… But can it be? Apparently… *(keeps staring at Vanek. Awkward silence).*

Oh, I do apologize… My name is Michael Vance, and you are… Frederick Vanek, am I right?

VANEK

(nods, then looks around the room)

Where am I? (*Michael doesn't reply, just keeps staring in silence*) Is it some mili…

VANCE

(shakes his head and grabs the bottle, suddenly in a hurry to interrupt Vanek)

Would you like some whiskey, Mr. Vanek? Oh, I do apologize, there must be a glass somewhere…

VANEK

No, no, thank you… Michael, right?

VANCE

(hesitates, then takes a sip from the bottle)

Yes, yes, Michael Vance. It's a pleasure to meet you *(Both stare at each other, then Michael nods to a whiskey bottle laughing shyly).* I do apologize, I am a little nervous, I wasn't sure it would work… And I am not much of a drinker, so… You see, my girlfriend says I need to open up a bit, face my fears and all… "Everyone needs to relax, Mickey!", - she says. - "Otherwise you'll burn out and start to hate your job!" Ha ha, as if I'd have the luxury to do so…

(Awkward pause)

VANEK

So, you are working here then? Some kind of mili…

VANCE

Would you like to sit down? *(startles from his chair, and grabs another one, putting it somewhat near Vanek, then rushing back as if scared to come too close to him).* The chair is fine, surely they *(nods up)* have way better chairs, maybe even leather and stuff… Maybe even *real* leather, haha! So, would you like to?

VANEK

What? A leather chair?

VANCE

(looks up)

If you want to, I may try to sneak in and…

VANEK

No, no, this one is perfectly fine. *(Sits down).* Thank you. *(Awkward pause).* I take it that I shouldn't ask about *where*… May I ask *why* am I here?

VANCE

(stares at Vanek, then grabs a bottle. He looks at it for some time, then turns to Vanek)

Are you sure you don't want some? There must be glasses somewhere, but… *(stops, sighs and collects himself, then continues in a serious tone)*. I do apologize. I do apologize, Mr. Vanek. I should have written some sort of an explanation beforehand, so that I can give it to you to read, or to simply read it myself, as now my mind is, you see, a bit clouded… It's a bit hard for me to formulate a clear thought, and I fear I may become somewhat emotional… Ha ha, my girlfriend would say that's exactly what I need to become - emotional, at least a bit emotional! "You've got no empathy, Mickey!", - she'd say. Then she'd cry. Usually… Well, maybe that is a way of… *(clear his throat)*. How did you like your life, Mr. Vanek?

VANEK

It was fine, I guess. *(Awkward pause, while Michael keeps staring at Vanek).* Eventful.

VANCE

(laughs unexpectedly loud)

You are a funny man, Mr. Vanek! I didn't know this about you. *(In a serious tone)* Any regrets, though?

VANEK

Hmm… I don't know, not really… (*Awkward pause*). I'd be fine without prison, I suppose…

VANCE

(laughs again)

Right! As if… Well, we'll get to that, but I'm glad that in the end you do have some remorse towards your actions. *(Vance stands up and starts walking around the room slowly, mainly looking down or at his hands - but not at Vanek).*

VANEK

My actions? I'm not sure, that's what I…

VANCE

You are an interesting person, Mr. Vanek, (*quickly glances towards the laptop*) I already know this about you. I suppose that was required to become… What was that… *(read from the laptop screen)*. A playwright, am I right? For theater only, no movies?

VANEK

No, yes, just theater… No - what was that? - no movies, no.

VANCE

Films, cinema, yes. You did have those in your time, right? *(checks the laptop screen again)*. Oh, yes, you did. *(turns back to Vanek)*. Not a big fan of them, are you? I know, me too, maybe it's a fami… My girlfriend, you see, she constantly says we should go out some more, go to the movies - to the cinema, I mean, to see films - but I am not a fan myself. *(clears the throat, in a serious tone)* I do apologize, that's why I am always trying to keep myself together - to avoid such *mumbling*. So I'll get to the point. *(Stops walking around the room, finally looks Vanek in the eyes).* I am planning to kill you.

(Awkward pause, they stare at each other for some time. Then Michael grabs a bottle and has a long sip with his eyes closed. Once done, he places the bottle back to the table, sits down and stares at Vanek).

I must say, Mr. Vanek, I am quite impressed with you. I thought - as a playwright - you'd be a rather talkative person, and will have a lot of questions. I do apologize for having such a strong misconception of your character. Don't you have questions about what I've just said, Mr. Vanek?

VANEK

You sound like a very educated young man.

VANCE

This is not a question. And yes, I am… I hope I am very educated, educated enough to become…. To finally become, what I must have been from… To get what I… *(clears his throat).* I do apologize. Do you have any questions? You don't even seem surprised, I mean…

VANEK

I've been dead for quite a while now, and… I don't mean to be rude or ignorant, but I am not entirely sure I can be surprised in a way, you understand it. But I've got a rather different perspective on people's characters, which - if only I'd be a playwright still - provides me with an opportunity to look at things…

VANCE

(In a serious tone) Still, It is not a question.

VANEK

Hm… All right, well… Are *you* dead, then?

VANCE

(In a serious tone) It *is* a question, but not the… No, of course I am not dead, I am very much alive and well, and it's just an ordinary Tuesday, but this is not the ques…

VANEK

(*interrupting*)

Then… how?… Some milit…

VANCE

This is not the right question, Mr. Vanek!

VANEK

All right, all right, I'm sorry, I… I suppose the question you'd expect me to ask is… "How can you kill me, if I am already dead", but…

VANCE

Yes, yes! *(Stands up and starts walking around the room, now agitated)* I do apologize, but… You see, it is not enough for a person to die. I know! When I realized it I was shocked too! How can it be, right? I was certain about it. As was certain of other things. For example, I was *certain* there was no threat for me: my father is American, my mother is American, I am a *proud* American - no problem whatsoever! But my girlfriend, she kept saying "We should do this genetic test, babe! Find out, what our routes are, our heritage!", and I agreed to do this stupid damn …! *(calms down, clears his throat)* So we did the test, and I got the results today, at the end of my shift… my work, so, yes I got the test results, I opened them, expecting to see some cherokee genes - you know, to laugh about it, or to piss off some leftist

shits by saying “*I am a true American*”, ha! But I found out… Fuck… FUCK I found out that I am 20-something percent Czech!

(*Awkward pause*)

VANEK

(in Czech language, with calm irony)

Gratuluji…?

VANCE

(laughs unexpectedly loud)

You are a funny man, Mr. Vanek! I already know this about you, but still… Oh, how much I’ve found out about you this evening though… *(takes a bottle and makes a short sip)*. So I look at those results and I simply cannot believe my eyes.

VANEK

How did it make you feel?

VANCE

(in a serious tone)

I do apologize, Mr. Vanek, but this is a wrong question. Again. For you it may all be a joke, but for me it’s a matter of my career, therefore it is a matter of my whole future. My whole life. *(Clears his throat).* I saw the results, I took a deep breath, then I called my father immediately. Then I canceled the call, as I thought that someone might listen to it, and find out that I am… So I went to my parent’s home, and I screamed… I asked my father straight away, no “Hello”s, no nothing - straight away: “Why did you lie to me? How could you hide this horrible truth from me?” And after all those long “*this is nonsense, son, you are American*” and shit, they finally told me, that my grandfather was a fucking immigrant.

(Michael seats down, fully submerged in his thoughts. Awkward pause).

VANEK

Excuse me, but… I really don’t want to sound wrong in any way, but isn’t it an issue *here*, only when a person is… What I mean is… You are white.

VANCE

(*with a horror on his face*)

God forbid I wasn’t!!

VANEK

It doesn’t make any sense, also, aren't Americans all immig…

VANCE

(interrupts Vanek and stands up and starts walking in circles again)

I am an American! Yes! YES! This is exactly what I kept saying myself! So I went back to work, back here, to make sure I know all I possibly can. Apparently, my grandfather left *(distorting the word)* Czechia after that… thing in 1968, came to America, learned the language – as everyone, who comes here, should! – and lived his life as a *proud* American, never showing any sign of his… So I felt relieved. But then… Then I kept searching. You see, when my grandfather came to America, he changed his surname into Vance, but his actual surname was…

VANEK

Vanek.

VANCE

You are a smart man, Mr. Vanek! I already know this about you, and I am glad you started to ask the right questions.

VANEK

This was not a question.

VANCE

So I dug deeper, and - here you are! A cousin to my late *(distorting the word)* Czech grandfather. And you are not just *some* Czech. You are a playwright. An activist! A revolutionary! A prisoner, for fuck's sake, you are a fucking prisoner!

VANEK

A political prisoner…

VANCE

Which makes it even worse! *(Takes a short sip).* When you were going around, throwing your bold opinions here and there - have you even thought about your descendants?

VANEK

Well, yes, which is why I…

VANCE

No! You did not! You had no thought of how this may affect my career as Immigration Enforcement officer – which now *thanks to you* could've been ruined – you only thought about yourself and your stupid idealistic… Or not so idealistic. You did fight communists, didn't you? Those leftist shits, with their gay propaganda, making everyone have abortions and shit…

VANEK

Those communist ideas weren't really about …

VANCE

But why couldn't you just keep being this theatrical… What was it…? Why couldn't you just keep partying with those actresses and shit? And why, why the fuck didn't you…

(grabs the bottle, has another short sip, then takes a deep breath).

What is the question that should be asked, Mr. Vanek?

VANEK

Why didn't I leave Czechia and become a dissident?

(they stare at each other, awkward pause)

VANCE

You could've come here, to America - and live a better life in a better country!

VANEK

Is that right…

VANCE

I do apologize, Mr. Vanek, but I really need to know.

VANEK

(looks around the room, then at Michael)

I thought of it. Many times. Hundred times more while being in pr… in there. *(with a shy smile)* I am not stupid, you see. I have nothing to fight against mili… against people like yourself, I suppose. And I would like to say that I was very brave, or certain of my influence, or… I mean, I just… I knew, what I knew, and that was my country, my people, and my ideas - which are all inherently connected to the very soil… Oh, I probably sound pathetic... The truth is, I just… I mean, that was my home, right? How couldn't I care?

(Awkward pause, Vance and Vanek stare at each other)

VANCE

(moves his chair closer to Vanek and sits in front of him, taking Vanek's hands into his in a way too strong grip)

So you do understand, then? I do care about my home! I am young, I need to make it better, I need to make it better for my family, I mean I am smart, you said it yourself - I am *educated*, right? I know that things sometimes… That sometimes there are *mistakes*, and …. you know, well, I mean in general it is… I mean we have to do it! It's not like I… it's not like we are against immigrants - no, we are just against *illegal* immigrants, you see? It's just the law that we should enforce! And when children are… or someone is… *(starts to sob, then collects himself)* It is a very good job, you see. I don't have a choice! To say the truth, I am not *that well* educated, there is good money here, like *really good* money, and I can build a career out of it… I am from a simple family! I've never had all those opportunities, you see, my parents are getting

older, and my girlfriend - oh, she wants all those flowers, and movies, and vacations, and stuff and… you have to understand it, you just have to understand me… (*pauses and stares at Vanek in horror, then almost whispers*) Oh my God, I've just realized that by bringing you *here* from *there* I've made you sort of an illegal… which makes me a descendant of illegal immi… No, no, no, no…

(stare at each other. Awkward pause)

This is why you must *really* die. Imagine in a few years some of *those people* will try to win again, and they'll be *reading* and stuff, and somehow they come across your ideas, your name, then they'll connect the dots… and I will be, I must be on my way to becoming someone at the Ministry of War no less and then - Just imagine! - all this information about my… about me… and now you are also illeg… (*sighs, collects himself*). I'll have to write your name *in that list*, it will just silently get into the system, and they'll ban you everywhere, you see, in schools, in theatres, in… what are they banning now… in there too! They'll just ban you and no one will ever know about you. I'll just have to do it! This is great, this is a great plan, everything will be great again…

(*sighs in relief and sits down, then grabs a bottle, smiles and takes a sip. Then looks at Vanek, almost calm*).

And you are a smart and funny man, Mr. Vanek, and I know this about you now, so I want you to understand that America is a free country, and we do care for our home, but we won't tell any other countries what to do. Well, I mean… What I mean is that no one will ban you in other countries, you see? Well, I mean… No, what I mean is that if they'd be *knowing* about you in the privacy of their homes in their countries, then it's all right, they'd be able to read you or whatever. Well, I mean… It'll be fine unless they show it in public, you see?

(*Awkward pause, the longest*)

VANEK

(looks at Michael, then at the bottle)

May I have some?

(takes the bottle and has a long sip with his eyes closed)

VANCE

I do apologize, Mr. Vanek, but …

VANEK

So, you've… for the lack of a better word, summoned me here by… whatever means you have just to… Actually, why exactly do you have the means you…? How old are you, anyway?

VANCE

I'm 22, and we were given those… I've just recently started, we are all mostly young people here, you see, and they gave us those access passwords and stuff, and said we'd just need to do our job right, like we are young, we must know what we are doing…

VANEK

And do you know?

VANCE

(*in a serious tone*) Mr. Vanek, you must understand… I've explained why I need all of… I've told you, my girlfriend… (*smiles*) You know what? My girlfriend, she's constantly saying we should go out more, we should travel more - so I've just got a perfect idea! We'd come to visit Czechia! After all of this is over, of course… (*gets nervous again*) Oh shit, but isn't it like super poor and communist still, and separated with the wall?

VANEK

The wall was in… Never mind. I think I'd better go now.

(Stands up, starts to move towards the exit).

VANCE

(*stands up too, now almost happy and as if dreaming out loud; he doesn't look at Vanek anymore*)

And maybe - when we are *there* - we can even *read* something of yours, wouldn't it… wouldn't it make you feel better?

VANEK

Sure, *much* better…

VANCE

And – while you are still here - maybe you can suggest something? Like, where to go, what to see…

VANEK

Right… Em…

VANCE

Maybe something to eat or to drink…

VANEK

I used to work in a brewery, actually.

VANCE

Oh, did you? My girlfriend once said that all brewmasters are the kindest of people. Was your brewmaster like that?

VANEK

Well, one can say that… He liked to talk, and he liked the beer.

VANCE

(*laughs*)

Well, he was a brewmaster, right?

VANEK

Right… I think you two would have a lot to talk about…

VANCE

I am not a very talkative person, you see…

VANEK

The beer can help with that…

VANEK

You are a smart and funny man, Mr. Vanek, I know that about you now… (*smiles and closes his eyes, relieved*) But soon it all will be forgotten.

Vanek exits. Michael keeps smiling, until he gradually falls asleep in his chair.