

# THE LEGEND OF THE ETERNAL RETURN

by JIŘI KRATOCHVIL  
*translated from the Czech by* JEFFREY CASTLE

JIŘI KRATOCHVIL  
*(1940–) is a Czech writer  
from Brno. He has published  
fourteen novels and novellas,  
four collections of short stories,  
three essay collections, and  
two collections of plays for  
radio and theater, a body of  
work for which he has earned,  
among other distinctions, the  
Jaroslav Seifert Prize and  
the Karel Čapek Prize.*

IT WAS AN EXPERIENCE THAT, I regret to report, shook Miss Jahodová (yes, the one who lived on the bank of the Svratka, on Jeneweinová Street) to her very core, and stayed with her for the rest of her life. One day (in the late morning hours), she heard a noise that froze her in her chair, and a split second later a shadow scurried across the carpet. When she finally saw it, she shrieked: the mouse, as big as a child's fist, had come to a stop at the wall and sat there upright, propped on its hind legs. Refusing to acknowledge its existence, Miss Kamila Jahodová stayed chained to her chair, her hands clamped tight over her face. But when the mouse started to speak in the hoarse, ragged voice of the bloodthirsty Generalissimus,<sup>1</sup> the laws of paradox dispelled even the tiniest wisp of fear, and she locked her eyes, now thrust wide open, on the mottled gray rodent as he confided to her that, implausible

1. The term *generalissimus* denotes the commander of all branches of a nation's military. The use of "Generalissimus" in this story is almost certainly an allusion to Joseph Stalin, whose dictatorial reign over the Soviet Union lasted from the mid-1920s until his death, in 1953. The rank of Generalissimus of the Soviet Union was granted to Stalin in 1945; interestingly, he refused to accept it, stating that such a distinction was too ostentatious.

though it may seem, he had been reincarnated in this form so that he could write his memoirs, which he had never quite gotten around to doing during what had been a truly thrilling life.

I've decided to hire you to take dictation.

But Miss Jahodová replied that she knew very little about stenography—she wasn't even much good at spelling—and she had never worked as a secretary, let alone a typist.

No matter, the Generalissimus barked. He wasn't exactly in a position to be picky. After all, the decision to become a mouse hadn't been his, either. It felt like punishment—for the life he had lived. But here he was, and there seemed little to be done about it. It was her name that had spoken to him, a reminder of the time he had spent in the company of the unforgettable Genrikh Grigoryevich Yagoda<sup>2</sup> all those years ago.

Miss Jahodová was not in the least bit excited by the offer, but because she had been going through a period of severe emotional withdrawal lately, she wondered whether the job might not be a welcome distraction.

And so, each morning, the two would spend several hours writing. Much to her surprise, Miss Jahodová found herself looking forward to these sessions (she discovered she

2. Genrikh Grigoryevich Yagoda was a secret-police official who served as director of the NKVD, the Soviet Union's security and intelligence agency. In this capacity, he played a central role in organizing the first of the show trials associated with the Great Purge. Some claim that he was also responsible for poisoning noted Soviet author Maxim Gorky and his son, on Stalin's orders.

rather enjoyed dictation, and the stories of the Generalissimus's life were simply delightful).

But unfortunately, this idyllic collaboration did not last—Miss Jahodová's bouts of emotional withdrawal were always quick to pass. No sooner had the last love of her life kicked her to the curb than she was eagerly on the lookout for the next. During what had been by all measures a rather long life, the Generalissimus had been presented countless opportunities to study the fate of man from very close proximity, a process that had instilled in him a certain disdainful leniency regarding the shortcomings of the human race. He knew full well that he alone possessed the discipline to maintain absolute control—all the rest were mere branches in the wind, walking sticks in the fist of circumstance, waving helplessly about. This is why he kept his tongue sheathed when Miss Jahodová started showing up late to dictation. What bothered him more was her inattentiveness to the work (she was no doubt thinking of the love of her life), which had become harder and harder to overlook, as was the threat it posed to their project. And indeed, as he began to leaf through his memoirs, the effects of her negligence were plain as day.

I think we need to have a little chat, he told her one day. But when they sat down to do so, he was met with a lack of understanding that bordered on rudeness. It's possible that toward the end of their talk he raised his voice as well, but we'll never really know. These things are difficult to judge from our vantage point in the present.

It was around that same time that Miss Jahodová realized she had little need for this relationship anymore. So she went down to the pet store and bought herself the cheapest cat they had. This was a single-use cat, you might say. She brought the creature back to her apartment, shooed it through the door, and then hurried off to meet with her latest flame. When she returned home, late that night, the cat sat waiting. As it greeted her, the Generalissimus's voice was unmistakable.

I DON'T WANT YOU TO BE STARTLED, but I have a talking cat.

A talking cat . . . ? Her lover looked quizzical. The cat stared up at them, his eyes narrowed to slits. His light-orange fur quivered like a forest charged with static electricity. For the most part, though, the cat stayed out of their way. I think this could work, Miss Jahodová thought to herself. And it did work. The cat contented himself with a few hours of dictation per week.

If during this story you have been inclined to think Miss Jahodová naïve, be prepared to think again. When she sensed another lover was preparing to leave her, it was simply too much for her to bear. (The cat looked on with open disdain as she fell to pieces.) When things got really bad, she saw no option but to fight with all she had left—she had to keep him, no matter the price. And so she invited her lover over for one last dinner. She made his favorite: roasted rabbit. (Of course, we know it was roasted cat.)

The Generalissimus dabbed his mustache with a napkin, stood up, and marched out of the room with her lover's youthful vigor. He was no longer interested in dictating his memoirs.

(His eyes still burned with the same murderous lust that, history tells us, buckled the knees of all who crossed his path.)

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The title of Jitří Kratochvil's "The Legend of Eternal Return" quickly brings to mind the writings of Nietzsche, who devoted a considerable deal of thought to the concept of time as a cyclical construct, hypothesizing that every element of human life, "like a sandglass, will always be reversed and will ever run out again." He notes further that each new iteration of this cosmic cycle will lead us to "find every pain and every pleasure, every friend and every enemy, every hope and every error, every blade of grass and every ray of sunshine once more, and the whole fabric of things which make up [our] life." Simultaneously tragic and beautiful, this conception of existence attaches a degree of futility to human endeavor, suggesting that try as we might to blaze our own paths, we will inevitably succeed only in recreating what has come before, an expression of our role as mere cogs in a much larger machine.

It is no great surprise that Kratochvil, a professed devotee of the postmodern, would find these ideas appealing given that they also informed what the postmodern literary tradition came to embrace as one of its central features. Operating in accordance with the belief that reality is merely a construct, a product of the systems and structures that underlie all of human experience, postmodern literature rarely, if ever, makes the claim of total originality; instead, it seeks to expose its constitutive elements and in so doing reveal the deeper structure from which it arose. As Jorge Luis Borges once wrote, "The certainty that everything has already been written annuls us, or renders us phantasmal." A great admirer of Borges, Kratochvil appears to have taken his words to heart in this story and its incorporation of Nietzsche. The life of Kamila Jahodová, the main character, is one of agonizing spirals and recurrences that sweep her along despite her

repeated attempts to break free. It is eternal return rendered in fiction. By framing his story in this way, Kratochvil calls attention not only to his protagonist's powerlessness but also, in effect, to his own. If everything has indeed already been written, then he is fated merely to repeat.

Against the backdrop of history, the themes of powerlessness and repetition that pervade this story take on additional meaning. Penned by a Czech writer born in 1940, "The Legend of Eternal Return" walks a fine line between fiction and reality. The presence of the *Generalissimus* (a rank offered to Stalin following World War II) is a not-so-subtle allusion to the forty-one-year period of authoritarian rule endured by Czechoslovakia as a part of the Eastern Bloc, and his recurrence throughout the story offers the even more sobering reminder that during the twentieth century, Czechoslovakia endured not one but three separate losses

to totalitarianism: to Nazi Germany in 1939, to the Soviet Union in 1948, and again to the Soviets in 1968, when the Prague Spring was quashed. The end of Kratochvil's story—much like the constantly unfolding narrative of history—leaves room for further development. But as Nietzsche would likely remind us, we already know what comes next.

—Jeffrey Castle

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