

American Dream

Vojtěch Žák



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Session 0. Establishing the rules

David Lacko was sitting in one of the uncomfortable white plastic chairs decorating Roland Deyl's waiting room, and since he was annoyed, he kept kicking the wall.

His mother pressed a hand to his knee, hissing an annoyed "Stop it" in his ear.

David huffed angrily but obeyed. "Did we have to come so early?" he snapped. "We still have ten minutes before it's even supposed to start."

"We wouldn't have to be here so early if you'd learn to be on time."

Frowning, he rested his face on his hand and regarded his surroundings with a look of deep annoyance. The walls of the room were painted bright green, and covered with pictures, most of which were adorned with the sentence:

What do you pretend not to know?

I pretend not knowing whose fault this is, David thought. But he wasn't a snitch, and that wasn't going to change. And after all, he didn't come out of this mess that bad off.

Though what was ahead of him was bound to be a real pain in the arse.

The door to the waiting room opened, and a middle-aged man with a beard entered from the other room. He was frowning and, without uttering a word, stalked away in long angry strides, the entrance door slamming behind him.

David stared at the door of the... what was he supposed to call it, an office? He wasn't waiting for a medical check-up. The sign on the door read:

Roland Deyl
personal coach

"He probably isn't very good if he's pissing people off like that," David smirked, but he felt a lump growing in his throat.

"Watch your tongue, you should be glad it didn't end up being worse than this!" his mother snapped back.

"Sure," David sighed, "I was just thinking that borstal could be more fun."

"One more word and I'm gonna send you there first thing tomorrow."

David turned to her sharply and stared at her in a silent challenge, his hazel eyes boring into hers, the same colour but a different shape. *Go on. Do it, I dare you.*

They stared at each other for a long moment, until his mother gave up and looked away. David returned to idly kicking the wall, his mood even sourer than before.

Finally, the office door opened a second time.

The man who stepped out looked somewhat shabby. Light brown hair falling to his shoulders, a well-trimmed beard, and narrow glasses. His clothes were clean and pressed but obviously well worn, a button-up with a blazer thrown over it accompanied by, of all things, a pair of green trousers. The brown oxfords he was wearing were practically falling apart and in dire need of a replacement.

He smiled brightly, holding the file in his hands in a way that reminded David strangely of hospital nurses. "You're Mr Lacko?" he asked, tone chipper, then glanced at David's mother in surprise. "And Mrs Lacko, I suppose." He shook her hand. "My name is Roland Deyl. I'm a personal coach." Then he turned to David, who accepted the offered hand unwillingly. He tried to press Deyl's hand as hard as possible but the man's palm was too big to get a good grip.

Deyl stepped back, studying his papers. "I was supposed to meet Mr Lacko alone today, and I must humbly admit I wasn't expecting you here, Mrs Lacko. Can I do something for you?"

"Well... I... I wanted to know what exactly you're gonna do with my son. How do you plan to oversee him and ensure that he's going to start behaving better?"

"I don't intend to oversee him," Deyl smiled, and both David and his mother blinked at him in surprise.

"I beg your pardon?" David's mother said, incredulous.

"This is not a prison, Mrs Lacko. We could put Mr Lacko under strict supervision, of course. Put him behind bars and have him report to us every day, we could create almost military-like rules for him... but what a surprise, that would be rather counterproductive to what our goal is." He went

silent for a moment, watching both of them carefully. “The jury decided we are to have ten meetings in total and that, for the period of one year, Mr Lacko is to be under ‘supervision’,” he made air quotes with his fingers. “Now, that’s truly a lot. So I think we can sacrifice our first session for an explanation of what’s ahead of us. If Mr Lacko agrees to it,” he turned to David.

“Agrees to what?” David was very confused.

“To your mother participating in our first session. We won’t go into any personal stories of course. We’ll simply talk about how we are going to work together so that we are able to reach the goals you are going to set for yourself.”

“What?” David pulled a face. It sounded suspicious. He thought the jury was sending him to some sort of probation officer who would be digging into his private life and who’d want weekly, or even daily reports so that he wouldn’t have the chance to do anything dumb. His mother being present for it was the last thing he wanted.

“Of course he’s gonna agree with me being there,” his mother snapped.

Roland Deyl smiled at her, a sad expression on his face. “With all due respect Mrs Lacko, this is not for either of us to decide. It depends solely on Mr Lacko because he’s the one who is my client.”

“What are you talking about?”

Deyl sighed a little before replying. “Well, technically my client is the state. They’re paying me to prevent young offenders from relapsing as part of an experimental treatment as well as helping them pay off their so-called debt to society. But as far as I’m concerned, that’s only on paper. I don’t care as much for what the state wants from me as for

what Mr Lacko and my other clients truly need. Therefore I intend to protect his privacy from everybody, including his family. This time belongs to him, and he has already lost five minutes of it. It is on him to decide how he wants to hold the session and if he is going to allow you to learn more about it." Deyl turned to David then. "So, Mr Lacko, tell me. Do you agree with your mother being present during the first session?"

"Okay," David agreed in the end. He was starting to get intrigued by it all.

"Excellent," Deyl clapped his hands in satisfaction and invited both of them to his office.

To David, the room looked like a place where an uptight organized manager would be right at home. It was long and narrow, with the walls painted a neutral beige, probably to instill some sense of comfort, a few pictures hung here and there. There was a comfortable-looking armchair and a faux leather couch. It looked almost cosy, with everything so neat and tidy, just like Deyl's mind and soul probably were. David couldn't help sneering. So many things around, but so tightly organized. The walls were also lined with shelves that were full of knick knacks; papers, pens, dice, and even some playing cards. And of course, proudly overlooking it all from the wall was another taunting sign:

What price are you paying for your actions?

"Most of my clients from the business sphere are pretty triggered by this sentence," Deyl smiled when he noticed

what David was looking at. “*Two thousand crowns per hour*, they complain. But that’s only during the first few sessions, then they get over it.”

“How come?” David asked.

“Because they either find out that what I am doing is working, or stop coming. Can I offer you something? Coffee, tea, water?”

In the end, three cups of coffee appeared on the table. One with milk for David’s mother and two plain black ones for the men. David immediately added an obscene amount of sugar to his cup. Deyl examined his wristwatch which showed that it was now twenty-five minutes after five. He tapped it thoughtfully.

“Allow me to tell you something about myself first. My name is Roland Deyl, I’m thirty-two, single, no kids. I started coaching professionally five years ago but I was doing it as an amateur for many years before that. Why did I become a professional? Because I have found out that it’s the most effective way for me to help people.

My policy is the following: I am here to support my clients with anything in their life that doesn’t work the way they’d like it to. I am not here to solve their problems for them. I’m merely offering help.

What should also be mentioned: I don’t care about Mr Lacko’s past. I’m not here to judge him. I’m just here to find out what’s not working in his life and what can be done in order to make it work.”

“I still don’t get it,” David’s mother declared. “What are you gonna do with him?”

Mr Deyl shrugged. “I don’t know yet,” he said, turning to David. “We will begin by talking about your life. You can tell

me about the things you're happy with and the ones you're not. What you'd like to achieve. What obstacles are in your way. We will come up with a plan on how to overcome them. We'll probably employ a system consisting of me giving you an assignment to complete after every session. It will be up to you whether you fulfill it or not. After all, you will be doing it for your own benefit, not mine. But, there are a few things we need to agree on first."

"Like what?" David asked.

"I would like for us to agree on some basic rules. But now that I'm thinking about it, I believe it would be best done in privacy," he turned to David's mom.

"You can't be serious," she retorted, her expression once again incredulous.

Mr Deyl shrugged. "The truth is, Mrs Lacko, that I would like to speak with you in private as well. But I need to speak with your son first."

"You wanna hear her talk shit about me, huh?" David sneered at him. He felt as though he had just bitten into a lemon, his expression turning sour. "You don't have to, I can tell you what she thinks about me. That I am irritated, rude and degenerate. That I'm throwing my talent away and I keep bad company and if things go on like this, I will end up in prison soon," he named all of his mother's usual complaints, spitting them out like poison.

"And do you agree with her?" Deyl looked at him, paying no attention to his mom's loud protests.

"What does it matter what I think," David leaned back in his chair, folding his arms on his chest. He didn't understand what the man's deal was. His feet were itching to start kicking something again.

“As you wish. I don’t want to talk with your mother about you, Mr Lacko. I want to speak with her about the whole process of our meetings, and also a bit about herself. Therefore it is important for me to speak with her in private. It’s for the same reason that I want to speak with you in private as well. The privacy of my clients is one of the most important things in these sessions.”

“Whatever. If you say so,” David huffed, unconvinced.

“Mrs Lacko, would you mind waiting for me in the waiting room? It won’t take long.”

Mrs Lacko did, in fact, mind but she settled on shooting them both an angry look and slamming the door to the waiting with more force than necessary.

“Mr Lacko, I need to agree with you on when and how our meetings are going to take place. I also need to inform you that I am obliged to deliver regular reports on how our meetings are progressing. I won’t put anything compromising in those, but I won’t lie either.”

This made David uneasy. “What sort of reports?”

“First I note whether you had come to a session or not. Then I report on what’s currently happening in your private life, what is your mental state, if and how you are contributing to society. As a part of your sentence you are also compelled to two hundred hours of community service, but what type of service that’s going to be is up to the two of us to agree upon. Although the ones upstairs will have to approve it of course.”

“The ones upstairs?” The description made David think of shadowy figures in black coats, sitting in a circle and deciding his fate with wicked grins on their faces. “Who’s that supposed to be?”

“Officers from the Ombudsman’s office.” Deyl paused shortly and looked at David in what he probably intended to be a reassuring manner before continuing: “Nothing you tell me is going to reach the ears of your mother. However, I might need to meet and work with her as well, in a similar way that I will with you.”

“Why would you need to work with my mum?”

“She has a great influence on your life. Just like your teachers, classmates, friends... but those would be hard for me to reach. I can reach your mother, though.”

The taste of poison from before came back, and David couldn’t help the outburst that overtook him: “She is the one who needs therapy, not me. If you had any idea about the things she does - ”

Mr Deyl raised his palm in a calming gesture. “A, this is not therapy but coaching. B, just as her opinion of you is not relevant to me, neither is your opinion of her. At least for now that is. We might get to it at some point, but not yet. Now, I need to talk to you about the time of our meetings. If I’m not mistaken, you are studying at the Captain Jaroš Gymnasium, second year. What does your schedule look like? Do you attend any after-school clubs, do you have a part-time job...?”

“Nah,” David grumbled, irritated by the interruption. Just another adult asshole who wasn’t listening to him. Adults never listened. No one ever listened to David.

“So when would you like to have our meetings?”

“Never. I don’t need a shrink.”

Mr Deyl shrugged, his expression infuriatingly calm. “I’m not a shrink. And I would be happy if you’d suggest a time.”

“All right,” David sighed in defeat. Might as well get this over with so that he could finally get out of there. “How about Wednesday at four?”

“Excellent. So we are going to meet in two days at four o’clock. Agreed?” He raised a hand for a handshake.

David stared at it in disbelief for a moment. He couldn’t tell if the man was making fun of him or not. The moment stretched on uncomfortably as Deyl looked at him expectantly and David just continued staring. Finally, David shrugged and shook the offered hand, sneering. “Sure. ‘greed.”

Mr Deyl accompanied him back to the waiting room and invited his mother into the office. The door clicked shut and David found himself alone. “This sucks,” he grunted under his nose. He really wanted to punch something but since the room lacked any suitable targets he kicked the wall. And again. And again. Fucking Koudela. Fucking Maroš, and Patrik, and Zdeněk, and Nikola! Fucking Kristýna! None of them got into trouble.

But life is not fair, so stop whining and get over it, a voice in his head retorted.

The door to the waiting room had suddenly opened then, and in came a petite woman with blonde hair. She was chubby, not quite fat but not far away from it either. With a flowy yellow dress and a pink purse, the only thing disturbing her picturesque Barbie visage was the black laptop bag swung over her shoulders.

She looked at him with curiosity for a split second before turning her head away. David shuffled his feet awkwardly and grumbled a quiet “Evening” in her direction, berating himself for how uncertain it sounded. Why was he so damn nervous?

She sat down and looked at him. "Good evening," she said finally.

"Evening," he repeated, this time louder.

"Are you waiting for Mr Deyl?"

"No. I'm waiting for my mother. What brings you here?"

She shrugged. "He is my coach."

"Ah. Is he any good?" David asked, not really interested in conversation, but his curiosity got the better of him.

She pondered for a while: "Yes, quite good," she said with a smile, and with that, the conversation ended.

A few moments later the door to the office finally opened and his mother came out. She shook hands with Mr Deyl at the threshold. "Thank you, doctor."

"I am not a doctor," he said. "I will be looking forward to it." Then he turned to David and offered his hand to him again. "It was a pleasure," he said. "Lucie," he turned to the newcomer, "give me a moment please, I'll be right with you."

"All right," she said, busily tapping away on the keyboard of the laptop she brought with her.

"Farewell," Ronald Deyl said to them and then disappeared into his office once more.

"What is he looking forward to?" David snapped at his mother.

"That's not important," she dismissed him, her tone suddenly relaxed and added: "You will see."

Her sour mood from before seemed to be gone.

Reality

David lit a cigarette.

The cold autumn wind blew his unzipped jacket open, so he huddled closer to the recess in the wall and passed the cigarette to the boy on his left. Koudela grinned at him, saying: "Why so tense, bruv? How was it?"

"All right," David grunted. "Looks like it's gonna be a piece of cake. Just gotta show up once per week and that's it."

"And that's it? Man, are you fucking kidding me? That's what you've been so stressed about? You're such a wuss."

Koudela was an arrogant football player with curly hair and an annoying habit of stretching his words out. He was regularly handing out insults without batting an eye. He was a fop, and had a reputation to maintain.

"You'd be stressed too, you wanker. They could have sent me to borstal. Now all I have to do is a couple hours of community service."

"Yeah? What does that mean?"

"Don't know. Probably picking up garbage or something. Or helping the elderly or something."

"Yoo, you'll be like a squatter, picking through trash" Maroš giggled, leaning on the wall next to them. Maroš had a head full of dreadlocks somewhat tamed by a headband, and he was constantly out of it because he was overdoing it with weed. Even now he was rolling a joint with practiced ease,

despite the fact that it was barely quarter to eight in the morning.

“Cut that stupid grin, you’re gonna come and help me.”

“Why should I?”

“Because you’re the ones who got me into it.”

“You got yourself into it.”

David tried to come at him. “You fucker!” he spat out angrily, but Koudela had intervened and stood between the two, not letting David get past him.

“Quit pretending you’re some big shot, pussy-boy, and clean up your own mess.”

“The fuck you mean, my own mess?” David pointed an accusatory finger at him, but his voice wavered a little. Koudela was a jock and he packed a strong punch when he wanted to. “It was you who got me into it.”

“You were trying to be cool,” Maroš grinned, unbothered by David’s words, and continued rolling his joint like nothing happened.

David was left speechless. You provoked me, was at the tip of his tongue but it felt lame, so he only shoved his hands in his pockets and hunched over. He desperately wanted another cigarette but had just run out. Koudela still had the one he passed him earlier.

Koudela noticed his wistful gaze. “Want some? Fuck you,” he said and stepped on the unfinished smoke. Then he turned to Maroš and started talking to him, completely ignoring David’s existence. Maroš lit his finished joint and the sickeningly sweet aroma of marijuana filled the air in the little alcove they were all standing in. The aroma of fun and relaxation. The aroma of alcohol and sex. They always smoked at Koudela’s home and then they would screw Lucie, or

Kristýna, or both at once. David was always either too wasted to join in, or told to fuck off and stop getting in the way.

That's what was happening now too. He was just getting in the way and being overlooked. No matter what, the joint wasn't passed his way. He really wanted to have a puff and loosen up a bit, even though he was afraid to be stoned during a lesson. Maroš never knew what the teacher was asking him about. Once, when they were talking about the Thirty Years' War in history class, Mazlová asked him why the bells toll twelve times at 11 o'clock in Brno. And Maroš, stoned out of his mind, stood up from his chair with eyes swollen red, and mumbled: "Was it lunch already? Have I been there? Or why are they tolling twelve?" David didn't want to be like him.

Since he didn't have anything better to say, David asked: "Shouldn't we go?" and right as the words left his lips he immediately felt like a wuss.

Koudela laughed in his face: "What are you so worried about? Scared of being sent to borstal?"

And so David stayed where he was. He stood there, hands in his pockets, even though he felt like an idiot. Stood there because he didn't know better. And the joint continued its journey between Koudela and Maroš and the air was full of the pleasant, heady smell, of weed and the clock struck eight, and their math lesson was just about to start.

"Koudela, Maroš, Lacko, well-well, the usual suspects," Kolářová exclaimed when they arrived at the classroom with a ten-minute delay. She looked like a proper Pratchettian dwarf. As Patrick - the dude who sat at the same desk as David - said some time ago: "Never trust anything that has both a pussy and a moustache."

“Later to begin, sooner to end, right?” David quoted one of the teacher’s favourite phrases.

He shouldn’t have done that. “Lacko, since you’re so smart, come here and show us how to calculate trigonometric functions.”

David had no clue, which didn’t prevent Kolářová from making a complete fool out of him in front of the whole class. As he was sitting down, he was red with fury. “Fucking bitch,” he whispered to Patrick, who nodded with sympathy: “Damn, she dished you out real good.”

But she was the last one. English, Czech, Chemistry and Geography passed and none of the teachers as much as looked at him. They just pretended he wasn’t there, no matter what he was doing. In Labs, he was jumping behind Strossmaier to attract her attention but got no reaction out of her. In the end he gave up and pulled out a book. There used to be a time when he would hide it under the desk. Now he just openly put it on the table without a care. David didn’t care what the teacher was talking about, it was all a load of nonsense anyway. He was just wasting his time in school, it was obvious. He’d rather spend it at home, playing video games or reading, or going for a walk and getting drunk with the rest of the gang.

Gang, yeah right, he thought bitterly. As if there ever was one. As if I was ever part of it.

“What are you doing after school?” he whispered to Kristýna during Music class. She was one of the hottest girls in the class, a bit shorter than David, with dark hair and a sweet smile. Not to mention a look in her eye that could turn a priest into a sinner by batting her eyelashes just once. It was hard not to eye her hungrily, especially

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