



Onegin Was a Rusky

1. Ask students to read chapter 1 at home for homework.

2. Comprehension:

Students either brainstorm what they can remember or you ask them these questions:

- What is mentioned about the girls' and boys' changing rooms?
- What happened when Helena tried to buy some contraceptives?
- How does Helena feel about Antošá?
- What was the story with Krsická and the jacket?
- Who are Punted?
- What does Richard look like?
- Why is the poem *A Girl's Letter* mentioned?

Work on this vocabulary or other words you find useful for your students:

1. daft
2. acronym
3. mauve
4. fib
5. idiot
6. stink
7. corduroy
8. fed up
9. voucher
10. bloodthirsty
11. witty
12. freak

(use halfacrossword.com to make some fun exercises for the students)

Can you use these words/ phrases in your own sentences?

- It struck me that...
- I had this huge urge to...
- it would never ever occur to me to...
- She's not allowed to...
- So she came up with...

Project:

Can you write your own poem in English or learn one and recite it like Helena did



for the competition? Send it to us at Palava Publishing!

1

Uncle was a legionnaire

Unless she's telling fibs, Zuza Ptáčková went out last year with some lad who played drums in a band called *Stag Stench*. This came to my mind just today after PE, because there was such an awful stench in the changing room again that it was quite unbearable. It struck me that *Stench from the Girls' Changing Room* would also make a rather good name, even if it is a bit long. What's interesting is that it doesn't actually stink that much in the boys' changing room – I noticed this even back at primary school. They stink too, but differently somehow. On the way from school I met up with Honza Kaplan, and we went for the tram together. I had this huge urge to ask him if he had the same impression of the girls' changing room, but I didn't.

"You know what? You keep reminding me an awful lot of someone, but who...?" he said. "Wait, I know, I've figured it out. You look like Garfunkel."

But that's rubbish. I look like Simon. Only my hair looks like Garfunkel's.

The other day the boys started this stupid poll about which girls in our class they thought are able to wear a miniskirt. There's thirty-four of us altogether, ten of whom are boys, and they decided that there are only five girls who can. They say I'm included, but it would never ever occur to me to put something as embarrassing as that on. They can go to hell. At the time, Musilová also told me that I might be quite pretty, but I look too clever, which spoils it a bit. Clever? Me? She should have seen me yesterday at the chemist's.

"I'd like those contraceptives there, please," I told the assistant in as normal a voice as possible. I tried to act as if there was nothing unusual about that, but it's a wonder I didn't flake out there and then. Only she didn't react at all, she just stared at me oddly. I took all my remaining courage in my hands and repeated it one more time. Just to be sure, I pointed my finger at the box I had in mind, to leave her in no doubt. Nothing. I didn't understand what the problem was. Do they only sell contraceptives to the boys? Or to over-eighteens? But then how did she know I'm not eighteen yet? The assistant pulled an even more awful face. Bloody hell, I wasn't going to give up at that point. She did make a move in the end, and took down the little box I'd been pointing at.

"You mean this?" she asked. "That's Tiger Balm actually."

I paid three crowns fifty and ran all the way home from Anděl. I'll never show my face at that chemist's again! Oh the shame! And that's how it is with me all the time. I'm not fat any more, but I am just as dim. That happened yesterday and I'm still all aflutter over it. Am I really capable of doing that? What an idiotic little idiot I am. Sure, I should get over it. You want to be sensible and leave nothing to chance, so there are no cock-ups, right? Only you shouldn't be as daft as I am. My folks are off to Zákopy on Friday, and Antoša is supposed to come over on Saturday morning, so I thought that if anything happened... It's been looking like it could for quite some time. Antoša would like it to – you can see it in his eyes, and I'm quite

curious too. We might not have been going out together that long – it’ll be just three weeks this Saturday, but that shouldn’t matter. Even though I don’t actually know if I really am in love with him. It’s hard to say. I don’t even know if you always have to know for absolute sure. I haven’t really been out with anyone before, because I never liked any of the boys who chatted me up, and those I did like or that I fell in love with – I didn’t ever tell them. But with Antoša now it’s worked both ways. I do like him an awful lot, and he is good-looking, whatever Mum says. I also like this going out. It’s a marvellous autumn this year – there’s still some fine sunshine, but now it’s nice and mellow – just right for a t-shirt and jacket, although I don’t actually own a jacket these days. That old corduroy one passed down from Dad, which I liked to wear so much – well, I lent it to Krsická in spring last year, when somebody in the changing room ruined her sweater when it was cold and rainy. Sweater, I say – well it was this awful little mauve jumper with black and pink lozenges, and some joker cut out a big lozenge both at the front and the back. Now Krsická is an odd girl – she never looks anybody in the eye when she’s talking to them and her handshake is like a damp rag. Nobody likes her very much, but I felt sorry for her, and I was also wearing a long black sweater that day, so I lent her the jacket. But then she didn’t ever give it back, so when there was nothing else for it I asked her:

“Come on, Jiřina, what about that jacket then?”

Krsická just looked down at the floor for a while and said:

“What, that one? Oh, I thought you’d given it me.”

I wasn’t expecting that – it did catch me on the hop. I wanted to say no, she was mistaken, she was to give it me back, but when I saw her standing there all dejected, I just couldn’t get it out, so instead I heard myself saying:

“Oh alright, keep it then.”

“It’s more for men anyway,” she said.

Turning round and walking away, she didn’t even thank me. She doesn’t wear it to school, so I don’t know what she’s done with it. Now September is fine even without a jacket, but every time I wanted to put it on, Mum still yelled that I looked like a frump. September is always nice. The beginning of autumn is my favourite time of year. Everything starts up again from the start, and for a time you can believe that nice things are about to happen, perhaps even a miracle. And this year a miracle really did happen to me – going out with Antoša is nothing short of one, so now there’s nothing for it but to bloody hope that he brings that contraceptive himself. I daren’t go to another chemist’s. But what if he doesn’t? Shouldn’t I just say no then? Even though I can’t actually say the word in front of him. I’d have to wait to see how things turn out, but if we’re lying naked in bed together, for example, then it might already be too late. And then naturally I don’t want to look a complete idiot in front of him (obviously I am one, but he doesn’t have to find out straight away). Oh bloody hell. Better think of something more cheerful.

Half the class have decided to see Saturday Night Fever tomorrow, but they’re almost all spivs and terylene types. It’s not for us. They like that greaseball Travolta. Ugh. Me and Jůlie are going to Letná Plain for a while after school, where we plan to meet up with Punted at the roundabout. Honza, Pavel, Richard and of



course Antoša are supposed to come too. Basically the entire Punted. We plan to sit in the alcove there and arrange the details for Saturday. On Saturday afternoon we're going to paint a picture together on Charles Bridge. Me and Antoša are going straight there from home. Damn it, I'm on about Saturday again. We've been called Punted now since the start of the school term – it's an acronym, because Richard Schlesinger fell in love with Jùlie and drew her a picture for her birthday showing a gallows with a teddy bear hanging from it. Underneath he'd written Punished Ted, so that's how Punted came about. I think it's quite good. As Jùlie would say in English, it's like cool.

But then when it comes to admirers, Richard is no good for Jùlie at all. She might very well be in bad need of someone, but this really isn't going to work. For one thing he's a good half-head shorter than she is. Okay, so is almost everybody else, so that might not matter so much, but then she doesn't actually *like* him, and I'm not at all surprised. He really does look awful. Thin and pale with square thick-rimmed glasses, he wears awful shirts and all kinds of funny trousers – very nearly a terylene type. And it's all in such wishy-washy colours – various shades of brown, grey and Schweinfurt green. All has a military tone, in fact that is what Richard is into. Old Schlesinger, Richard's grandfather, was in the Wehrmacht during the war and then they deported him, but to the wrong side, so he ended up in East Germany, so Richard is a quarter German, and pretends he's terribly proud of that – proudly embraces it, though more for a laugh. But even if he didn't embrace it, unfortunately that's the way he basically looks, that is, not like a German, but like a caricature of a German from 1950s Bolshevik war films. The other day we're walking to school together, and as we come up to our ghastly tiled box of a grammar school, I say it's a wonder it's just called *Above the Gallery* and not *Above Vladimir Lenin* for instance. So Richard answers that if anything it would have to be called *Under Vladimir Lenin*, because nothing at all could be *Above Vladimir Lenin*. He's quite a witty lad, that Richard, he writes nice poems and he draws well, but if only he washed a bit more, like the real Germans do – cos boy, they are normally so clean and tidy! Sometimes he really does smell, so then his jokes don't do him any good at all.

Then again Antoša is half Russian. His dad got off with his mum when they were studying in Moscow. When I say Russian... his mum is a Jew on her mother's side. She's really nice, speaks with this soft Russian accent, which would normally strike me as awful, but in her case I actually like it a lot. Antoša has her amazing big nose and large eyes with extremely long eyebrows. His hair is not all that Jewish – he'll probably soon be bald, but that doesn't matter. Then again he is awfully hairy, so all in all he does at least look like a man. His mum affectionately calls him Antoša, and only when she's annoyed does she call him Anton. Even Russian can sound nice when you hear it from someone you like. Antoša doesn't have a dad any more. He was killed when Antoša was about ten. He was flying somewhere in an ordinary airplane which unfortunately the Communists were smuggling some weapons in for some Arabs, and some other Arabs got to find out about them and shot the aircraft down. They simply brought it down with all hundred and fifty unsuspecting passengers on board. Antoša's granddad liberated Czechoslovakia as an officer in the Red Army. Richard's granddad in the Wehrmacht occupied Serbia,



while my grandad and grandma and other relatives went up the chimney at Auschwitz. So when we get together with Punted, we always have something to sort out. Most of the time it's a big laugh. What else can you do apart from make a big joke out of it all?

When my mum first saw Antoša, she said he looked like a Russian ice-hockey player, which really is the limit – for her that is really quite insulting. But then she was actually awfully annoyed at the time – it was the day we first had a date and started going out together. Not that I deliberately wanted to show him to her, no way, but I'd forgotten that for some reason she didn't have her keys, so I had to be home before she was. Antoša was with me, and we'd just got to our street when I saw how bad things were. Scowling, she marched up and down the pavement, from our block to the telephone kiosk and back again, and apparently she had been doing so for the past hour. Totally dramatic scene. Mum is an actress, even though she hasn't had a regular part since the Bolsheviks in Ničín threw her out of the theatre. These days she goes around the schools doing programmes for kids. She's not allowed to do anything else. And from time to time she creates a real scene for us at home. She was really mad. As she was barging to and fro like that, this lad who was mucking about on the pavement got in her way to boot.

"Why do you keep getting in my bloody way? I'm working like an idiot here, and you keep getting in my way!"

"Then try working more intelligently. That'll improve your mood straight away."

After that she clearly just could not hold Antoša in high enough esteem. And she's not at all happy that I'm going out with somebody. And if I really have to then she has somebody completely different in mind, I know.

For example, some freak like Engineer Dohnán that time in Bulgaria. When I bring him to mind even now I feel like throwing up, and I get angry with her. It was a year ago in Sozopol. We were living in digs as usual, and this guy was living there too – in the room next door. I don't know how old he was, but he could easily have been thirty! And he was the slimeball of all slimeballs. He kept blundering all round me and staring like an idiot, and although he must have clearly seen that I didn't want to even share the same doormat with him, he never stopped gawping. And the way he did it! Whenever he looked at me his watery little pale-blue eyes totally bulged out of their sockets. Totally pervy. Normally mum says people like that are staring like a cat crapping in straw, but not this time! She really liked this one. And when this idiot worked out that he wouldn't get anywhere with me then the creep went after mum, trying to wheedle his way into her favour and asking her if she would have anything against him just taking me out on a little trip sometime. I was totally fed up with all this, so I begged mum for God's sake to say no, she wasn't letting me, or simply that I didn't want to. But the traitor smiled and said sure, why not? She had nothing against that at all. So I had to avoid him until the end of the vacation. And that isn't all! As I then found out, she even gave him our telephone number, so the greasy sleazeball kept pestering me in Prague. And that was okay? But Antoša looks like a Russian ice-hockey player! Oh well, there's more unpleasantness to come, that's for sure.

On the way to school today I counted four signs saying LET MIŠÍK SING and



five saying PIVOŇKA IS A TWAT. Pivoňka must have been immortalized this way in every single neighbourhood – he is definitely the most famous physics teacher in Prague. Apparently he never stays anywhere longer than a year, because by then the students and parents are always up in arms. It's been touch and go with him at our school too, but he's still in there for a second year. We were all afraid of him well in advance, since he was preceded by this awfully bloodthirsty reputation. Even before he arrived we'd heard that when those on duty forget to wipe the blackboard he tells them to take off their sweater and use that. And those who give wrong answers when they're called out to the front get their heads banged against the blackboard. Till they bleed. But none of this was true, so we were a bit disappointed. He does look like Štětináč from the Brotherhood of the Cat's Paw, but he didn't strike us as any nuttier than Hanuška for example. That's another physics teacher, who, when Class B went round to his lab to remind him that he had physics with them (how daft can they get?), and he should have started a quarter of an hour before, thanked them, stuck the cup of coffee he was holding into his coat pocket and left. I'm not afraid of Pivoňka, and I have gradually improved my physics marks with him from fours to twos. Oh, that's not important.

I think that Mišík is singing a bit again here and there – somebody told me they'd seen him performing in summer. Now it's the *Pražský výběr* band that's bothering them, apart from everything else. I don't actually follow music that much – I don't even have a cassette recorder, but now and then I buy a record, usually jazz or some Baroque or Medieval chorals and songs, but I do also have one by Mišík and one by Kocáb too. This September instead of luncheon vouchers I bought one by Hegerová and a book, Villon's Testament. Apart from pocket money barely worth mentioning, I had nothing at all left, so I will have to go down to the road sweepers again, just as soon as I arrange it with someone, so I don't have to go all alone. Maybe with Richard. He lives in Prague 5 too. Jůlie and all the Punteds are from Prague 6, so they'd rather go street-sweeping there. Every minute counts in the morning.

I borrowed Jeremiah by Werfel from the library as well as The Brothers Karamazov. I've now read that – excellent, excellent, excellent! I'd like to steal both of them. Dostoyevsky is quite a different matter to Chekhov – I've read a couple of his short stories and almost all of the world-famous plays, but they didn't really grab me. If anything I'm always annoyed at the way his protagonists are totally inept. Always Moscow, Moscow...! So why the hell don't they just pick up sticks and go there? Instead they just keep pacing up and down the room or at most the garden and drink tea. I really don't know... What's more, every afterword says that it's actually a comedy, but it's not clear to me at all what's meant to be funny about all that. Take Three Sisters or The Cherry Orchard – a parade of impotence! Enough to make you have a fit. Then there's Pushkin – no big deal either, though I quite like that Onegin. That's quite witty. In the first year Jůlie and I entered a recitation contest, very much as a matter of course, because we were both used to them from primary school and we were both still daft. The very name – Prague Egg! As if we were competing for the largest hen. And then the competitors, naturally almost all girls, usually looked exactly the part. That time I wanted to recite some of the Happy Prince by Oscar Wilde, or perhaps some François Villon, but mum stuck her



oar in again to say no, no, no, she had a much better idea. And she started getting me into Onegin, so I could definitely recite Tatiana's letter, which supposedly suited me marvellously and this and that. So here I got really mad and said Onegin was a Rusky. The same goes for Tatiana, and no way was I going to recite anything of that kind. So she came up with another idea, which, it has to be said, was even worse. It was called A Girl's Letter.

*Don't come to our village, my dear,
My folks they don't want to see you.
I like you more than anyone here,
But it's not to be – you know people too!
Father frowns, mother sobs away,
My brothers moan – they're all that way.
I do feel quite bad, believe me, Chung-tse!*

*Don't climb our wall at night, my dear,
You may damage the mulberry trees,
I like you, but let's be sensible here,
Or my folks will be angry again, please.
Father frowns, mother sobs away,
My brothers moan – they're all that way.
I do feel quite bad, believe me, Chung-tse!*

*Don't tread on the lily bed, my dear,
For harm is so easy to do.
It almost saps my heart of blood here –
I long to dream of you!
Father frowns, mother sobs away,
My brothers moan – they're all that way.
I do feel quite bad, believe me, Chung-tse!*

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