

Uma's version by Emil Hakl

Translated by Tomáš Míka

You've never walked so much in your life

as you do now with her. You can barely finish your breakfast and attend to the most essential workaday tasks before she hangs her beseeching baby blues on you. The question isn't whether you'll go out, but where. Somewhere you haven't been together. Slowly but surely, Prague is becoming too small for you.

You climb the steep footpaths

to the Baba ruin overlooking Troja Valley. You stride amidst the rainswept shrubs. Every leaf is laden with a single large drop of water. Two glistening hounds cavort in the dewy grass along the ridge. Their owners, shivering beneath umbrellas, drag on cigarettes and murmur to one another.

"They look like mushrooms," she remarks. "May I ask a question?"

"Ask away—I like your questions, Uma."

"Did we bring anything to drink?"

"A bottle of 'Glenfiddich'—I don't know to pronounce it."

"Yay."

You stride through the ghostly quiet. A vertical forest grows from the sheer walls of the ravine. Moths swarm in the bushes. Coils of mist wheel among the rocks. Silhouettes of dogwalkers merge on the footpaths. The raw smell of wet earth pervades the air. You march upwards. Blackberry bushes strewn with purple leaves sprawl along the edge of the trail.

"I have another question. May I?"

"Sure."

"Since when are we on a first-name basis?"

"Since the bike ride, I guess."

"Can I still ask the question?"

"That wasn't it?"

"No. I've been wondering why every time I see armed terrorists showing off in a video, there's always a Toyota logo in the background."

"Must be a sponsor."

"You've never come across that information before?"

"Maybe I did, but I didn't analyze it."

"Why is there war everywhere?"

"There's a battle raging for local and global power, intrigues over oil, drugs, technologies, and enmeshed with it all is an extremely primitive civilizational conflict."

"What's behind the civilizational conflict?"

"Cultural differences, hatreds, fanaticism, poverty, lack of education, latent sadism everywhere, and everyday politics. There are too many of us, we get in each other's way, so we're constantly looking to make enemies out of people who show the slightest difference. We need to scale back the numbers. Here in Europe we've been doing it forever, but recently it's calmed down so it's their turn."

"Whose?"

"The ones praying in front of the Toyotas."

"Do animals do it too?"

"No. They just do what they have to in order to eat. Well—some of them do it on a different level, I suppose. The smarter ones."

"But what you do with them is horrible. Horrible."

"I know."

"By the way," she asks, "does the word *manifesto* derive from the phrase *many fists*?"

"Maybe," I answer.

"Do you believe in anything?"

"No."

"If someone came after you and said he had to scale you back, what would you feel?"

"Fear."

"Is *diseased* the same as *deceased*?"

"Not quite."

"What's a spirit?"

"An inner purpose."

"Purpose of what?"

"Anything with a form. You were speaking about it a while ago."

"Do I have a spirit?"

"Man, you have a spirit like few others do."

"Did you call me *man*?" she whispers.

"Yeah."

"What will happen next?"

"I don't know."

"When you know, will you tell me?"

"I will."

You're standing above Prague. In the distance, misty curtains of rain drape the sky. The city looks like diecast tin. Like a junk shop—dusty bottles, sewing machine carcasses, mixers, broken up racing tracks, pots, glass, blinking erector sets, dead computer monitors, keyboards, demijohns, chess sets.

You feel the first drops of water fall on your back.

"Somewhere I read...can I ask another?" she says into the wind. "*Number four: Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?* I'd like to know how a person can be born old."

"What it means is spiritual birth. Enlightenment. It's either a metaphor, a parable, or a bad translation. Probably the latter."

"Spiritual birth?"

"Yep. But sadly we're talking about—almost without exception—lunatics, adolescents, and unbalanced or feeble-minded people. If you don't count the frauds and the alcoholics."

"But listen. *Number five: Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.* I know water, but where can I find the Spirit?"

"The kingdom of God is a faulty conjecture. Nothing like it exists, at least not in Christianity. It's an obsolete concept, an outdated fairytale."

"OK, fine. But *number six: That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.* The Spirit must exist—who is it?"

"A higher authority. A device from ancient times when people were afraid of storms, the Sun, infections, death, basically anything they didn't understand."

"*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus. Extra ecclesiam nemo salvatur. Salus extra ecclesiam non est.*"

"I have no clue what that means. Maybe something like, You can't get by without an operator?"

"That sounds right."

"Screw the operator."

"That's easier said than done," she smiles. "What does this mean? *To explore great depths, you don't need to travel far; you don't even need to leave your most immediate environs...*?"

"Maybe the author should explain what he means by depths. But he obviously doesn't give a shit and would rather just hurtle forward in his solipsistic little egg shell."

"What egg shell?"

"I mean this affectation in which this author...you've read this someplace?"

"Yes."

"...in which he expects you'll just go along with him, or at least you'll let him go on writing gibberish."

"Uuu-ahh," she replies. This is her version of a protracted "OK."

"Listen," you say. "I really like you. I like you very much."

"I know."

"Is it OK if we kiss?"

"Yes."

"Can it be a slow kiss?"

"Sure."

And so you began living together.

After seven weeks, you've registered her as a flatmate. Initially, of course, it's because you were running into Mrs. Ponděláková every other day, who gave you an earful about how she understands very well, really, she was young once, but oh my gawd, you know, we all have a certain amount of material responsibility! The garbage, the pipes, water and sewage fees. No one can avoid it. Next month they're coming to replace the windows, how'm I supposed to pay for that... You're a good tenant, or at least you seem like one, alriiiight? I have nothing against you! But keeping someone unregistered in your flat means higher electric bills, higher gas, more trash! You seem to have both feet on the ground, so why don't you register the lady and no one will speak a word against you, least of all me! What do you think, can we do that, okaaaay?

Uma accepts this

without any objections. For her, daily life is brimming with outlandish apparitions. She's crazy about going shopping at the Vietnamese food mart, where she feels right at home. The lady grins at her broadly, bawls at someone over Skype, then all of a sudden they're kissing each other's hands, or Uma takes the other's hands and holds them in hers for a moment. For minutes at a time they speak together like this.

To run up the bill, Uma tosses this and that into the basket, pineapples, half-rotten strawberries, turnips, Kikkoman sauce, oyster sauce, soy sauce, wafers, chocolate bars, cashews, mangos, cheap wine, napa cabbage.

Once, during a heavy downpour, she happened to see the Vietnamese lady walk out in front of the food mart half-dressed and begin some kind of intensive Oriental exercise, and without embarrassment she joined in. Ever since then, they exercise together when it rains.

Now and then you go and watch them. The human woman's movements have an insouciant, irregular elegance, while Uma is more agile, crisper, harder.

Sometimes she takes the dog out by herself,

after which she returns him to Mrs. Merxbauer, they drink coffee together and the like. But you know from signals each of them has given that they don't like each other. Then she goes for a

walk, buys a bottle of some awful hooch at the food mart, crosses the vestibule with her shifting salamandroid gait, her rattling steps thrum the metal stairway, the door opens and here she is.

Again you embrace, you dally, you kiss.

Then she hits the books, or she browses the web, or she studies the view from the window, while you slog away in an effort to earn a living for the two of you.

To the extent that your media contacts with former colleagues are still good, you work for them. You create pages for InDesign, you shuffle photos, reduce texts, enlarge headlines, but it inevitably runs over to the next page and you have to start again. And you continuously remind them to pay you.

Together you don't want very much. Cider, some quality bourbon, here and there a bottle of Hendrick's. You don't have the heart to deny her anything, really, you'd sell your soul if it came to that. And there's the rent, electricity, insurance. Apart from that, it's entirely appropriate to bake a nice roast now and then to give you the strength to go on. Or to go for a trip somewhere.

As far as the building's concerned, you get the feeling that apart from you and Ponděláková nobody lives there. Every now and then you catch part of a monologue, an argument, a loud noise from the cellar, a scraping sound in the corridor, a flushing toilet, but it could be a television or the occasional tradesman doing his job.

The walks get a little old sometimes,

but you can never get enough of the movies and games. She loves all versions of the name game, matchbox, mikado, twenty-one, mau-mau, poker, tiddlywinks, Scrabble, various IQ quizzes, Half-Life 2, Quake 4, Tetris, Deus Ex, musical chairs. She's happy to listen to counting rhymes, nursery rhymes, she loves bawdy songs. She usually memorizes them right away and then asks you for another, so you're always wracking your brain to think of more. When you're out of nursery rhymes, she'll settle for street names, the names of neighborhoods, countries, planets, geographical entities.

"Name the major European countries," I tell her.

"Dornia, Spoczekar, Matapore, Mermeck, Russia."

"You left out four of them."

"Flupravia, Ahoyvia, Gonczar, and Hoo-faw."

"Correct."

"I'm just kidding, could you tell?" She isn't sure. "OK then...Who cooked for you when you were little?"

"How little?"

"Before you started going to school—did you go to school?"

"Of course I did. My aunt cooked, my mom cooked, and my granny."

"What did they make you?"

"Tomato soup, *rizi bizi*—rice and peas, I loved that; mashed potatoes, casserole with pork and potatoes and cabbage...My aunt's specialties were venison and fish—my uncle was a poacher. She would make trout in butter, eel baked and brined, or with sorrel. Grannie made this tasty game hen, she cooked rabbit on Sundays, during the week it was lentils with sausage and soup."

"Rrrmm. That's nice to listen to," she says. "I'd like to try it."

"Have you ever eaten any of that?"

"Of course not, dumb-dumb, you know I don't eat. What kind of soup did you like?"

"Potato, tripe, skirt steak, goulash."

"A skirt is a garment—do you also eat them?"

"It's made from beef flank, and we call that skirt."

Sometimes she pulls a random book from the shelf, opens it, and she either reads it silently or out loud in an unnaturally hoarse, halting voice.

“Rinse the rear half of the rabbit, remove the skin, cut it twice along the backbone, cut a slit along the length of each leg...—they’re killing and butchering an animal here, is that OK?”

“It’s a cookbook—a religious text. Martyrs are inseparable from religion,” you say.

“Yuck,” she says, tossing it onto the table and picking up another. “What’s this:

Consciousness has differentiation as its source, differentiation has experience as its source, experience has comparison as its source. But what does comparison have as its source?”

“Experience, which has differentiation as its source, which has consciousness as its source. Don’t you think?”

She sits quietly for a while.

“It’s true,” she says after exhausting all the variations, permutations and combinations.

You throw yourself on her, and you briefly throttle her—this always amuses her. At first she pretends to submit and sticks out her tongue like she’s a goner, then suddenly the resistant, elastic material that composes the sinews in her neck becomes taut, and the fun’s over.

“A good film beats a good book, right?” she asks.

“For every good film, there’s at least a hundred good books.”

“Explain,” she demands.

“A book is entertainment for people who don’t enjoy a surplus of means, and it has several other advantages. You can digest a text slowly, you can return to it again and again, you can meditate on it, sometimes it will grab you by the heart and won’t let you go. Films, on the other hand, drip with ambition, special effects, and money. Books are written by people who want for better or worse to capture authentic life, of course most of them die paupers. Films are made by professionals—they don’t care about reality, and most of them die financially secure. Still, I prefer films. You probably don’t understand, do you, noodlehead.”

“I understand, moron, I have a heart too,” and she presses your hand against her chest.

Then she picks up a flash drive from the table, licks it, wiggles her supple little tongue, and places the drive between her lips. She pretends to download information.

You both laugh until you tumble over.

“You spray when you laugh,” she says with admiration.

“You can do it too. Just put some water in your mouth, swish it around, don’t swallow and laugh.”

Your reward for this information is an orchestrated spit take and a change of shirt.

“Anyway, I have enough water of my own,” she adds.

“So I see.”

“I’m with you,” she remarks out of nowhere.

“But why?”

“So you won’t be alone.”

“I don’t mind being alone.”

“You’ve had relationships before,” she states.

“Yeah, I’ve had plenty...”

“What’s a relationship?”

“Closeness, trust, personal attraction, harmonizing of pheromones, a kind of dependence, duality, cohabitation.”

“You’ve had nineteen relationships—is that a lot?”

“How the devil do you know that?”

“You counted them when we were on a walk.”

“I inflated the number to impress you.”

“In the Reaper’s file on you, the number is similar.”

“What are you talking about? He has a file on me?”

“He wanted to know whether you’d treat me well. Whether you were going to do anything bad to me.”

“I’m afraid I am—you’re about to get tickled.”

I brushed her lightly under her arms and on her tummy. You're both surprised to learn that she's ticklish. She's much more surprised than you.

Since the day

your status became official, your landlady downstairs has been bursting with curiosity. She bangs various objects around, and behind each one is the same question: Why don't they ever leave the house? They don't have a car, or kids, or relations—don't they go anywhere? No weekend trips with rucksacks? Don't they *have* to go anywhere? Don't they have jobs?

Two or three times a week you play a little game to appease her. You raise your voices, throw books on the floor, you bark, you hiss, Uma feigns a roaring wail that sometimes accidentally spills over into her brassy laughter, which carries through the house like a tornado.

Beneath the laughter you chase one another around the room, falling on the couch and pressing each other close. You inhale her undefinable scent.

"Embrace me," she says faintly.

Glued to one another, you fawn and snuggle.

"What does a person like you need in life?" she breathes moistly in your ear.

"A key to the flat, a flat, electricity, internet, Outlook, Photoshop, a phone, water, heating, a stereo, a washing machine, a refrigerator, scissors, a few saucepans, cutlery, some plates, a toothbrush, soap, two sports jackets, two coats, two pairs of glasses, socks, an alarm clock, pants, shoes," you drone.

"I was wondering if you could also buy me a winter jacket and maybe some shoes."

"Are you cold?"

"No, but I'd like to wear something you like."

"I like simple things."

"Correction: I'd like to wear something in which you'll like me!"

"Why do you want me to like you?"

She returns an electric gaze, and you sense a weakness in your knees that combines with a flutter in your solar plexus.

You go shopping at the Palladium mall. The height of Uma's rapture is triggered by a pair of scaly, copper-colored ankle boots that look like the ones worn by cavaliers in medieval frescos.

When midnight comes around,

Uma goes to sleep. That's what the two of you call it. She lies down and adjusts her settings (you don't know how, exactly, you prefer to stare at the ceiling), you talk for fifteen or thirty minutes before she shuts down. But she isn't silent—she hums like an electric toy. Her toes twitch gently. She emits various smells. When she's half asleep, she often busies herself by synchronizing her files, or at least that's what she says she's doing. You suspect that she's just actively loafing. She learned it from you, and she's learned that she enjoys it.

Sometimes she lies and pretends to be sleeping, but she's awake. It's as though she's waiting for something. She draws breath, and she exhales. It's a question of oxygen delivery, the same as for you.

When you wake up in the middle of the night, she always startles you—a half meter away lies an immobile, artificial corpse. You go to the toilet, you drink some water. When you return, her eyes follow you—she's responding to your motion and is already beginning to warm up.

"Night chess?" she suggests.

You set up the pieces and she checkmates you in eight moves.

"Nightcap?" she asks.

"You shouldn't."

"*You* shouldn't." she repeats.

“Why not? When I drink alcohol, serotonin floods my synapses.”

“What does that mean?”

“Everything’s a little more fun.”

You lie there together, each holding a glass. There’s something decadent about it. Equal parts amusing and destructive.

Ever since Uma’s

residency became official, Ponděláková regularly stops her in the stairwell and tries to engage her in chitchat. After it happened a second or third time, Uma realized what was going on. She quickly learned to imitate to a tee this stupid, bleating ninny with no opinions. She began to prepare for their encounters. She chewed through *iToday*, *People’s News*, *Aha!*, *Arrow*, *Newsweek*, the BBC, *The Czech Position*, *Parliamentary News*, Facebook, and other sources.

The building resounds with the perfect model of an empty, provincial conversation.

You sit upstairs with the door open and you listen. You smell sauerkraut and mothballs. In Uma’s rendering, the elongated Prague vowels regularly drive you to bitter-sweet delirium.

By contrast, she’s learned to speak

with sophisticated charm when engaging your friends and the friends of their friends. In the evenings she’s begun to enjoy visiting bars, dives, holes in the wall, theaters, sleazy public houses. The one condition is that the lighting has to be terrible. Half-shade, no table lamps, no candles. Or at least the people have to be packed in like sardines. One roars at another, a third roars at the first. Beer, shots, smoke.

Sometimes someone she hasn’t met sits down next to her. These are her moments. She quickly sets about adapting to the other’s particular communicative style. She loves this—she picks up dialects, argot, slang, she masters local catch phrases, local jokes. She maps out the terrain. She assesses each new interlocutor in an instant, mechanically putting herself in his or her shoes, applying turns of phrase with a surgical precision that makes her sharp company. Few can keep up once Uma gets started.

Least of all you. And on top of this, that laugh of hers... You pound shots, you down sour coffee, beer, wine, and cider, and at dawn you’re awakened by heartburn. You’re getting the impression that your old friends are passing you by, leaving you behind. Most of the eye contact and speech on a given night are exclusively between them and Uma.

You go to the toilet. In the men’s room, what you see in the mirror is a parody of your youth.

You go home together

the usual way—from Nuselská Street up the steps to Na Jezerce park [from the map it looks as though the steps go *up* from Nuselská to the park], past the empty playgrounds and dull plane trees. Occasionally you swoop down a children’s slide, you crawl across the monkey bars, you climb up and come down from an object for which there’s no name, you pass through another, and, out of breath, you walk on.

Suddenly, your eyes are pierced by the headlights of a jeep that stands quietly in front of you. The slight old man inside gestures toward the passenger door. It’s like a scene from a film.

“The Reaper,” Uma utters faintly. “You take care of this, I’ll wait at home.”

You’ve barely sat down before the old man gets going: “Let’s get right to business—I’d like to remind you that I would be very unhappy if anyone else learned of our situation.”

“I haven’t told anybody anything.”

“Friends, parents, siblings—not a word. I say this in all seriousness.”

“I should point out that you’ve given me no reason to keep it a secret or told me what will happen if I don’t.”

“She’ll disappear, and you’ll be made to pay a price. Do you have children?”

"I've already told you I do."

"Then you know that children always belong to the one who raised them."

"You mean Uma?"

"Mm."

"What is it you want?"

"I want you to be discreet."

"I have been."

"Good. I'll be in touch, but in the meantime, keep your promises. I'll give you a lift back if you want."

You don't want one. You close the door, and you return on foot by a combination of shortcuts and detours. A bench appears in your path, and you sit for a moment, watching the clouds. Roland Barthes says somewhere that an individual's existence is a function of the number of social roles he fills. Work relations, social standing, education, parenthood, driver's license, flat, weekend house, team sports, circles you move in, clubs, Airsoft, pub societies, hobbies, memberships, etc.

If this is true, then you're both dead. You live in a ghetto for two. The Reaper is clearly counting on this. In the end, he's gone to great lengths to remove all possible activities from your life. Now he needs to be sure you'll jump when he whistles.

[...]

On Sunday the air is thick

with a chilly fog. You couldn't ask for more. Microbus Man is late, arriving in a rush and stinking of weed. But he drives nimbly and has his wits about him. Thanks to several shortcuts and traffic infractions, in no time you find yourself in front of the villa from which you first departed with Uma.

The colorless redoubt with the arched gable is unlit. Microbus Man puts the van in reverse and parks it behind a high storage container. He takes a pair of gloves and gives you a pair. You quietly get out and walk to the villa.

Microbus Man takes something out of his pocket and more or less breathes on the gate, which opens. Together you move quickly up the garden steps. The garden has gone to seed and teems with dozens of dark, slouching figures, but these are just neglected, contorted shrubs.

The main entrance takes longer to crack. He gapes at the lock and jangles some small metal strips. The lock clicks twice.

"Sh'y go w'you?" he mumbles.

"What?"

"You wan' me go in w'you?"

"Yes, there's one last lock. Then you can come back and wait for me in the car. There's something I need you to help me carry out, I'll call you or send you a text."

You open it quietly and proceed through the corridor. You switch on the flashlight at its lowest setting. Together you walk through the house, then down the stairs to the courtyard and the garage gate. This lock is a puzzle for your experienced partner. He wrestles with it and exhales deeply. After standing for several long minutes in a space from which there is no escape, you begin to think you can hear the grass growing. A bird stirs on a branch; somewhere close—maybe on a television—a beast howls.

Suddenly the lock gives.

"Thanks," you whisper. "Go back and wait for me. Buzz me if anything happens, my phone's on vibrate."

“Khh,” you hear.

You close the door behind you

and enter. Around you are familiar shelves covered with metal cans, plastic drums, rows of boxes. Meters-long roles of aluminum foil. Pressurized bottles along the wall.

A heavy, metal sliding door leading to the next chamber is partly open. A murky dimness pervades the room. Through the gap in the door, the air is cool on your face and you sense an unfamiliar odor. A grim paroxysm briefly seizes your gut. It's too late to go back, although you'd like to. You'd regret it for the rest of your life if you gave up now. You push the door the rest of the way and drag yourself over the threshold. Your heart is shuddering like a poodle in the rain. It feels like you're in an MRI scanner. Or the grave.

The room is all but empty. Against the wall, a row of cupboards is arranged by size and covered with plastic film. Two metal cabinets, two freezers. Both are humming. You open them a crack—bottles containing liquids, canning jars of uncertain content, other objects carefully wrapped in foil.

Standing by the opposite wall is what looks like a high tank or a tub covered with tiles. You approach it very slowly, as if pressing against a strong wind. You point the flashlight deep inside. The tank is filled with a yellowish, oily fluid. Your light penetrates to barely a quarter of the depth. It seems to you that something pale is drifting within it—something made of plastic or a piece of fabric. You set the beam on high.

In the tank, a body

hangs suspended, face down. It's slender and naked. The skin is bluish and in many places puckered and, it seems, loosened. You shine the light on the head. The face is calm, in the half-light it's almost smiling. The hair floats about the perfectly fashioned skull. When you lean close, you see that the mouth is half open.

You can't tear yourself away. You're unable to move. You stand and stare. You feel an utterly impersonal, indifferent, yet all-encompassing and crippling pain.

You want only one thing—to stroke her, to embrace her one final time. You place your index finger in the fluid—it's lukewarm, thick, inert.

There's a knot in your shoelace. You toss the gloves aside, and even so it takes you forever to untangle it. You throw your socks, your pants, your shirt on the floor. You drop the waterproof flashlight inside, and it lazily rolls beneath the dummy's face. A cloudy halo blazes around its head.

You place one leg in the tank. You lift your other leg and you step inside. It feels as if you're being pulled toward her. The surface reaches above your navel. You sense a faint burning, but this doesn't deter you. You want to merge with her. Embrace her. Lift her head above the surface. Penetrate her.

The moment you touch her

you hear a pounding sound. Suddenly, fluorescent lamps start to buzz in the next room. Something metallic is quietly laid on a shelf. Some kind of talon or enormous insect's leg is trying to shove open the sliding door. A greenish, smooth forearm crutch.

The Reaper stands in the doorway. You have no idea how long you stand staring at one another, you up to your waste in the tank, the Reaper hanging on those crutches by his fibrous claws. It may be an hour, though it's probably less.

“Shall we exchange information?” he says quietly.

You nod.

“First of all, get out of the tank. That solution isn't healthy.”

You remain in the tank, grasping the body round its slippery waist.

“Second,” the old man continues, “I’ve done plenty of regrettable things in my life, but I’m afraid that today you’ve crossed a line and I can’t just let you walk off into the night.”

You shrug your shoulders. Speech is out of the question for now. Perhaps you could muster a howl or a wheeze if you tried.

“But we’ll take care of that later,” the old fellow continues. “I can imagine how you might feel, but please spare me. From where we’re standing, Uma slipped out of control. Why control, you might ask. Because nobody on this planet lives outside of someone else’s control. Moreover, we bore direct responsibility for her.”

“Responsibility for what exactly?”

“For her conduct. Several days ago she took the life of my associate Mr. Rašna.”

“Took his life?”

“That’s right.”

“How?”

“Numerous stimuli can cause a person to enter shock. It may not manifest itself outwardly, but death can be quick. So I’ll say it again—get out of that tank! It could happen to you too.”