

Trapped by Pavel Renčín:

Translated by David Short

She stared at Schabe and sensed that the window of opportunity was closing. The seconds flew.

She went over to the window and grabbed a thin spike, the largest of the set. She clutched it hard and realised for the first time just how terrible what she had to do was before she could flee for her life. She held the weapon in a frenzied grip, tiptoed back until she stood over her captor. She was so overcome with fear that she couldn't stop shaking. She raised her right arm ready to strike. She watched the vein pulsating on his neck. She could see, just beneath his skin, the rushing black stream of filthy gunge that was keeping the pig alive. All she had to do was make one quick flick of her hand and sink the blade into his Adam's apple, deep, right up to the handle. Then a torrent of blood would come streaming from the wound...

But no! She couldn't bring herself to do it. She stood over him, teeth clenched, tears of rage and agony streaming down her cheeks. Do it! she mentally screamed at herself. Do it! But her other half whispered: You're not even thirteen yet, and you want to kill an adult? You don't even know how to kill another human. Nobody's ever told you how. And suppose you don't bring it off? What will he do to you? Rip your arm off? Poke your eyes out? Cut your breasts off, as he threatened to before? Make you eat your own fingers?

She stood over Schabe with the blade poised to strike, still summoning up the courage to get on and sink it into the monster's neck and kill him, when suddenly she realised she was staring into his open eyes.

"G' morning," Schabe said, his pointy teeth glinting behind his lips. "You can't say you didn't have your chance." Then he struck her arm so violently that something crunched inside her wrist and the weapon flew off into the darkness. He punched her in the belly. She yelped, then lay writhing on the ground, while Schabe kept kicking her until she hit her back against a grave. That time he beat her completely senseless.

When she finally came to, he was gone. She was lying on the ice-cold ground, numb and frozen stiff, unable to get to her feet for the rest of the day. She was delirious from fever and completely parched. Her whole body ached, every last muscle. Her ribs were covered in bruises and targeted by sharp shooting pains... and her face was covered in scabs. Marie started cursing herself, weeping helplessly... she'd had her chance and flipped.

Six days passed and nobody came. If she hadn't got a supply of water in an old bucket in which she caught odd drips and drops, she'd probably have died of thirst. She was ravenous, but so weak that she could hardly stand. She stopped trying to exercise, simply lacking the energy for it. She didn't get much sleep, but nodded off as much as six times during the daytime. She was afraid that she'd lost track of time. And although at first it hardly seemed likely, she did feel a little better with each day that passed. The physical pain was slow to dim, but the bruised bones and swellings gradually eased. Fortunately, nothing was actually broken, except perhaps one rib, which hurt with every intake of breath. Hunger and thirst were the biggest drain on her. When Schabe came back seven days later she didn't know whether to be glad or give in to despair.

She backed away from him into the furthest corner of the crypt, terrified that he was going to give her another beating, or that he'd come back to kill her, but at the same time something inside her hoped that he would go ahead and do it and so put an end to her suffering. Schabe, however, was surprisingly amiable: he said nothing about the previous week and acted as if nothing had happened. He was more than usually garrulous and had even brought her a supply of food. Stuff in tins and jars and even some fruit. When he offered her a bar of chocolate, her heart almost stopped beating. How long had it been since she'd had something sweet? Did she even remember what made it taste so good? Chocolate... She didn't take it: she couldn't fight back the defiance that suddenly rose within her... Schabe yelled at her, calling her a thankless bitch, then hurled the chocolate vaguely in the direction of the wall where she went to the toilet.

Then he fixed a dog collar round her neck and hauled her outside on a rope leash, out into the crumbling church.

Marie tried to savour every second even though it was late afternoon and the sunlight was still painfully bright. Her joy couldn't be blunted even by his command that she walk on all fours like an animal. Fallen pine needles pricked her knees, while stones imprinted pressure sores on them. Luckily they didn't go very far. Marie relished in silence the grass

and the trees, which she found dazzling in their greenness, and the birdsong, which here, in contrast to the crypt, sounded so loud and crisp.

Schabe took her down to the stream, where he let her have a good wash. He even helped her a little himself. He took most trouble over her face, insisting she get rid of all the dried blood. The water was so icy cold that it made her wince, yet it was also so wonderfully pleasant, so purifying. She'd have been happy to dissolve in it. She splashed about in the stream despite being blue with cold and her teeth chattering, and she also had a good drink of the water before Schabe realised and stopped her. Once he was satisfied with her clean-up, he called her to him and subjected her to a close inspection. He spent most time on her face, grabbing her by the chin and twisting it this way and that.

"What have you done to me?" she asked him.

For a long time Schabe said nothing, while fires played about his eyes. "I've started telling you my dreams." His peculiar laugh made her think better of asking him any more questions.

Then he led her back to the crypt.

He did those nasty things to her and whispered into her face: "You're mine, all mine. And if anyone wants to do anything about it, I'll kill 'em. And if that means you, I'll kill you!"

She said nothing.

"Even if you run away, you'll never be able to hide from me. You'll carry my imprint on your skin. My story. My nightmares..."

After he'd gone, she dashed over to the stinking corner to find the bar of chocolate. The silver paper gleamed like a holy relic, unhesitating, she ripped it open and stuffed a whole row of four segments into her mouth at once. That first taste she was utter bliss, furiously she chewed and sucked the chocolate and hot tears streamed down her cheeks. She knew that never in her life had she tasted anything so good. She hated herself for it, but right then she felt grateful to him. She stuffed herself with sweetness until her whole mouth was awash in it, finally licking all her fingers clean and even the wrapper, which by now carried barely more than a whiff of chocolate.

(...)

The worst thing that could happen did happen, meaning that that day nothing happened at all...

Marie was so on edge that she couldn't sleep a wink. With each passing minute, each hour that passed, her hope was dying away. She'd been hoping that Mrs Matějka would show up with the police and people from the village. She'd been expecting Schabe to come bursting into the barn at any moment, to beat the hell out of her, torture her and finally kill her. But the night passed with nothing of note happening, and as morning metamorphosed into midday there was still no sign either of the housekeeper or Marie's torturer.

The wait was killing her, but there was nothing else she could do. She walked up and down the barn, running her fingers for perhaps the hundredth time round the wooden box inside which her head was locked. She wondered if she could smash it open by running full tilt at the wall. How likely was it that she might break her neck? Should she risk it? She experimented by banging the box against the wall, but it hurt like hell and the wood gave no sign of yielding. It was oak, soundly nailed and screwed together; Schabe had taken great pains with its construction.

Marie went and stood by a metal plate that had several hooks set in it; it was nailed to one of the inner pillars and had probably once been a coat rack. She tried to examine the box in its reflection on the metal and work out how it was made, but through the narrow peephole she could see hardly a thing. This scrutiny of the box held her attention for a short while, but led nowhere. Fear and the agony of waiting came back.

The air was heavy, like before a storm. Nothing stirred, either inside the barn or out in the yard. Schabe only showed up that evening, after dusk. Marie spotted him as the first stars were beginning to show. Slung across his belly he had his green knapsack and on his back a huge dark-red backpack, which he immediately locked in one of the sheds. Then he went across to the pump and primed it violently until the ice-cold water came gushing out. He scoured his hands under the water, laughing aloud at something. He even stuck his head in the water, letting it stream down his neck, splattering everything around. It left his anorak and trousers sopping wet as well, but, for all that, Marie knew that if he came to her that evening, there'd be blood behind his finger nails. As so often before... blood behind his nails.

It wasn't so easy to get rid of... it was always there and there was nothing he could do to wash it away.

She expected he'd come at her, and he did, later in the evening. She retreated, scared witless. She tried to tell if he guessed she'd been trying to escape. But Schabe was being strange, drooling from one corner of his mouth. His hands were red from how he'd been scouring them, but the red on his face was a spattering of dried blood. As he knocked Marie to the ground, his breath carried something like the stench of putrefying carrion.

He showed no interest this time in subtleties. He bound her hand and foot to the board he'd erected for the purpose. It was actually a solid deal table, standing in the middle of the barn and fitted with four straps that he'd screwed to the corners to hold her wrists and ankles tight. This time he didn't even take the wooden box off her head, just ripping her trousers off and raping her on the spot. The whole time he spoke not a single word, nor did he even look at her – just wheezing away and carrying on more like an animal than a human being. Marie was shaking in terror. She tried speaking to him, but he seemed incapable of grasping her meaning. Then he went out, leaving her tied to the table. Almost at once he came back in, carrying a large lamp, which he hung on the topmost beam, and a bottle of evil-smelling liquid and a tattoo kit.

Marie threshed about as much as she could, but to no avail. He kept her squashed down against the table top with such force that she could scarcely breathe. He was strong and very heavy. She couldn't offer any kind of resistance, or inflate her lungs. She was choking and losing consciousness. He waited for her to black out... then set about tattooing her. He kept at her with his needles all night long. She shrieked with the pain, but to no avail. As he laboured, for her everything just mingled into one horrific nightmare. The din in her ears, the burning in her eyes, everything about her spinning. But she survived.

When Schabe went off next morning, her whole chest was covered in blood, all the way down to her groin and up to her shoulders. She couldn't even see what he'd done, because she was still lashed to the table top. She had shooting pains in her back and the joints of her wrists and ankles were swollen. She wanted to die, but she couldn't even move.

(...)

Is this the place? I've found it! Up there, on a coppice-covered hillock, there's someone tied to a tree. The trunk is grey and leafless, long dead, eaten away by bark beetle and hollow as an old bone. The white figure is nailed to it. Good God! I shout to Klara. I'm sure it's her! I set off at a run across a grassy meadow, quite waterlogged in places. Beneath my feet the yellowing grass makes a squelching sound like the greedily lapping tongues of marsh-dwelling leviathans. I run on towards the woman on the hillock. I make a leap. And another. I'm almost there! The ground is getting soggy and soggy, my footprints grunting like gaping throats. Klara! Suddenly my feet sink deep into the mud, the brown mush splatters upwards, blurring my vision.

I'm almost at the foot of the rise. I look at the figure above me: its white, ragged dress is blowing about it. The girl's skin is a greyish green colour. I've sunk in up to my waist. I reach out to her. Klara! The mud is as ice-cold as death. Now I've come to, fully, as the last shreds of the hallucination fade away. Suddenly there's a dark forest all round and the moon is reflected in the pools of water seeping up between the grass. I'm trapped in the middle of a marsh. I get the shivers and they pass through me like needles. I try to break free, threshing about and grasping at tussocks. I try to lever myself up and reach for the nearest sapling, but it's too soft underfoot and I just sink even lower. I dig my nails into clumps of vegetation, but they just break off at my touch. The morass is hungry. I grab at a black, bony arm, but it's only a dry branch that goes and snaps beneath my weight. Whatever I do, I just sink lower and lower. I'm cold. My heart is pounding, I can feel it in my throat. And yet I try to calm it. If I stop moving, the rate of my descent does slow down.

Someone's approaching. I can see a dark outline hopping across on invisible islets of terra firma. Wary, but sure-footed.

"Marie," I shout and start waving. "Over here!"

A few more hops and the crouching figure is here. And now it dawns that it's come from the hillock in the middle of the bog. Its black eyes and bared teeth gleam in the light of the moon. It isn't Marie. I start threshing about again, trying to extricate myself. But that gets me nowhere; I'm almost up to my chest in mud. The figure is coming towards me, gripping a spade in both hands. I'm drowning in terror, and the bog is dragging me down.

It's dark, my senses are sharpened with adrenalin, and at that instant I'm sure that there's nothing remotely hum about the thing above me. It props itself up on the spade, eyeing me hungrily.

"After all those years... it's you..." it croaks in a human voice.

I know I'll be dead in no time. That fills me with a strange serenity, as if my sanity has withdrawn into the background and control of my body has been taken over by an automaton. I can sense that although the thing is saying nothing, it's also roaring strangely at the same time, in a sinister voice at the threshold of audibility. A tornado of concentrated rancour. And something inside me responds to it.

Suddenly things start happening very fast.

It tries to bash me over the head with the spade. The brunt of the blow is taken by my arms as they try to ward it off. They must both be broken, to judge by the pain! If I weren't stuck in a bog, I'd collapse, but things being the way they are I'm standing there like a totem pole. Another blow descends, hitting my head from the side and setting my ears ringing. I'm not dead. The spade caught me with its flat side.

I can hear it roaring like crazy. I blink, but all I can see is darkness. No death blow comes, Schabe is grinning into my face. He's bent over me, I've got no means of escape. I'm jammed up to my chest in a bog and the thing above me is opening its muzzle.

A black force is pouring from it, reaching out to me like a child's hand, but knobbly and with talons. I imagine it trotting across the surface of the bog like a scorpion. I try to pull away, but can't escape. The force has no substance, it passes right through me and starts scrabbling about for *something* inside, and having found it, grasps it in a grip of ice.

A terrible rage starts to build inside me, that *something* within... *something* evil that I've been suppressing all these years, that I've kept behind the bars of sanity, has just smashed the door in. It comes heaving up from the depths and I imagine it as the kind of terrible scream at which, in films, the windows of tenements shatter, cars crash and hydrants explode. I'm seeing red. For a moment I stop thinking and try to scramble towards Schabe. Inch by inch I work my way through the bog. I want to break his bones and drink his blood! I want to kill him... I'm seeing double, something is bulging out of me, and suddenly he's all around me, gripping both my wrists, drenching me in his putrid breath, I can feel his nails digging into my flesh, and I can't draw breath. I'm being stifled; Schabe has filled my entire world. My entire being is stretched taut. The evil within both of us has merged into one. His

is much the stronger, dragging mine out by the roots. Everything inside is bursting. "Come now, come to daddy," the demon prattles, sucking out my rage and hatred, ripping it out of me, I'm half-dazed and feel about to explode. The darkness between me and Schabe has grown denser, filled with something tangible, screaming and strained to breaking point. I get a glimpse of the straggly monster's outline, but that could be just my imagination. For a split second we're joined as one. Merging. And suddenly my universe contracts into a single, blinding white dot. There's a crack, something's broken off from me, and Schabe gulps it in. Taking it in as if it were his own. The vision has passed.

I'm weak, exhausted, up to my neck in the morass. Feeling totally empty, like a toothpaste tube squeezed of its last.

Schabe is my opposite. Brimming with evil. At last he's complete, savouring his victory. Scraps of cloud are chasing across the sky, and the Bohemian Forest is beginning to clothe itself in black. Wearing a crazed expression, he now raises the spade above his head, ready to strike and finish me off. I'm just about to say something, but too late.

Schabe suddenly flinches and a spike comes thrusting out of his shoulder. There's a spurt of blood. The creature bellows, squealing like a stuck pig. And that's what he is. Marie can barely stand, her eyes ablaze in mute fury. This is the day it all ends. She strikes again with such force that the tip of the spear grinds past his ribs before coming out through his chest... But the beast has yet to die. Blood is streaming from Schabe's mouth. He seizes the spear, locking his white fingers round it and impaling himself on it even further. Marie stares, wide-eyed. Schabe has turned to face her, arms outstretched. She seems mesmerised, unable to move. The spike gets ever closer to her.

"Remember what I promised..." that horrific bloody object, no longer remotely human in aspect, rasps.

Schabe grips the shaft and the cracking of bones and tearing of sinews is clearly audible. As if feeling none of it, he tries to get his arms round Marie and impale her. At last she blinks and comes round. The monster sinks his claws into her and presses up against her. She staggers and the spear tip pierces her abdomen to the depth of an inch or two.

I have to do something! I grope around me for anything to give me a purchase and I brush against the handle of the spade that Schabe has dropped. God alone knows how I came to feel in the mud the mouth organ that must have slipped from my neck, and at the

very moment as I grab hold of it, I feel something solid beneath me in the mud, a spot of firm ground. I prise myself up with all the powers left to me and jam the spade into the mud.

I start scrabbling my way out, using the spade for support like a paddle, the sheer enervation making me see red, but I know I have to keep at it. If I can't get a grip now, I needn't bother trying ever again! My teeth are clenched so tight that the enamel squeaks, but I am easing myself free of the mud's grip. I can do it! I can!

I'm almost there. Schabe has knocked Marie to the ground and is grabbing for her throat. The tip of the spear, still poking out of his belly, is lacerating her groin. He's about to kill her. I won't be in time. I get a crazy idea and follow it up on the instant: I cramp the mouth organ to my lips and blow. The sharp noise is discordant and deafening. It gets carried across the bog, the heavy mist and the trees, across the entire Bohemian Forest. Schabe looks round instinctively.

At the same moment, Marie takes a knife from her belt and thrusts it in beneath his jaw line. Schabe yelps with pain and turns back to her. By now I'm free and only feet away from her. I lurch forward and hit him on the head with the spade. Marie rolls to the side. I strike again with such force that his bones crack. The spade's broad blade whooshes through the air and lands with a dull thud.

"The head!" Marie shrieks.

Schabe is writhing on the ground, dazed. I take another swing and strike again. The blade hits home repeatedly. Blood showers onto my face. I do what Marie keeps shouting at me to do.

What's happening is a living nightmare. I'm not me, but some murderous madman having visions, a blood-spattered bloke who's just chopped someone's head off with a spade. The effect of the drugs inside me has started to pass and they mingle with the crazy surge of adrenalin, and I see fireworks exploding. Marie is on her knees, crying her eyes out. With joy and sorrow. She's an old woman, wrinkled, careworn, bleeding and smelly, and at that moment and in her place I can also see a little girl wailing.

We both sense the relief. We've done it. At last, after all those years... Schabe's body is still twitching, the parted head clacking its jaws. In the throes of death its straggly black remains are curling up.

I don't relish the return to reality. It's blood-red with pain. And ice-cold like the bog that surrounds us. It's now that I realise that next to the tree on the hillock there's a female figure

hanging. Silent, with a strange wicker mask drawn over its head... I flounder up, and as I get near I can see that the ropes have eaten deep into the woman's flesh and her palms have nails driven through them. The body is drained of colour. I rip the mask from her face and instantly avert my gaze. I want to throw up.

It isn't Klara, but an unknown woman, dead. Long dead. There just to lure me to the middle of the swamp. I turn to look towards Marie, who has stayed at the foot of the rise; she's got enough problems of her own right now, as she tries to stem the blood and bandage her wounds. I take one last look at the long-dead, mummified woman. Moonlight floods the land.