

Elvis of the Elbe by Jiří Kamen

Translated by Mike Baugh

Nagasaki and the Forehead Dot from a Fountain Pen

Nobody knew why or when people started calling the little log cabin on the left bank of the Elbe “Nagasaki,” but everyone in the town of Horní Žleb would smile in disbelief when they’d hear the story of granny Adela’s third husband finding the mummified corpse of Konrád Schütz, the former owner of the cabin, up in Nagasaki’s attic at the end of the 50s.

In mid-August, right after breakfast, Konrád Schütz put on his finest black suit (the one he got married in) and climbed the wooden steps up to the attic. He lay down on the floor and closed his eyes. He could hear birds singing out in the garden and the occasional rumble of a train chugging through the valley down below. The trains were mainly heading off to Germany, still ravaged from the war. On that day no ships were sailing on the river. The water was too low. He didn’t bring anything up to the attic to eat or drink, not even his heart medication – he intended to die there and didn’t want any distraction from his preparations for death. And there was nothing to hold him up. Yesterday, he put all his affairs in order, paid what he owed to the housing co-op, gave his dog and cat to the neighbors who were moving to Germany. He made a bouquet of roses from his garden, went to the local cemetery, and laid it upon the grave of his wife. Tomorrow, at the latest, we shall meet again, he declared at the gravestone. He made a mysterious face, as if the grave contained the portal to another world – or, at the very least, some recording device. Konrád Schütz slept almost the entire day in the attic. When he awoke, he could feel the roof being scorched by the August sun. He died while it was still light out. The summer heat and the draft (from all the holes in the old roof) combined to dessicate the body. The story goes that Adéla’s third husband organized Konrád’s funeral. They buried him on the family plot next to his wife, Trudi.

Alfons Bůžek, Adéla’s last partner, had his own theory about the origin of the Nagasaki sign. Konrád himself had assembled it from birch branches and nailed it to the gable. Perhaps he wanted to show that he was sympathetic to the victims of the atomic bomb. Except Japan was bombed by the Americans – whom even we could praise in 1945 as allies fighting on the right side. So even this idea about the birch sign couldn’t help Konrád

before it disappeared. After the Communist coup of 1948, Konrad's sign might have stood a chance at succeeding, since Socialist Czechoslovakia took the stance that bombing the Japanese cities amounted to a war crime. The Nagasaki sign remained on the gable until the new millennium, by which time the main characters of this story, Alfons and Adela, were long dead. In the first year of the new millennium, the porch of the empty cabin detached in a heavy storm and crashed off the side of the cliff. Before long the whole structure collapsed. The Nagasaki sign disappeared in the debris.

In the middle of the 1970s, the interior of the cabin resembled an alchemist's lab: on every table big and small, on chairs throughout the house and the attic were five-liter pickle jars filled with water and elderberry blossoms. Fermentation plugs made from rubber tubing stuck out one end of the closed jars, so the elderberry juice could bubble out into a pot of water. Adela sealed the fermentation plugs with wax. She would make a sparkling wine out of black currant in the basement. Every year there would be more and more jars of elderberry juice and currant wine. A regular visitor to Nagasaki would have gotten the idea that in just a couple more seasons the jars would push the residents out into the garden. There was so much glass after the cabin collapsed in the big storm that the neighbors thought a huge greenhouse must have been demolished. But there were no greenhouses above the river. A cascade of wine, diluted with elderberry juice, poured out from the debris. A quick gush that vanished into the rain flooding down the slope.

On the second of every September, Adela's three daughters and their husbands and kids would come to the Nagasaki cabin to celebrate her name day. She had each daughter with a different husband; all three of them had died. In her old age, Adela married the childless widower Buzek. The celebration took place on the porch; the large dining table in the sitting room was covered with jars of elderberry juice. At the head of the table sat Adela. Alfons had his chair next to his wife, but during the celebration he didn't sit – he kept serving elderberry juice to the kids, currant wine to the adults. He handed out deserts that the daughters had brought and plates with Adela's potato salad. He was spooning it from a large porcelain bowl. Adela's third husband had found the bowl in a cupboard that the Germans had left behind in the sitting room. He called it Konrad's bowl.

The first ones to arrive to the September celebration were the daughters and their families; Alfons and Adela would arrive later on a motorcycle. Their tardiness was usually caused by some problem Adela had with making the potato salad. She always prepared the salad according to the same recipe, yet she never finished it on time. She got the recipe from her first mother-in-law. It was a simple recipe specific to the area around Trebon: potatoes, eggs, onion, apple, lard, pepper. Nobody understood how it could take so long.

Adela married Alfons mainly for his motorcycle, a Jawa 250. For their first Christmas together, she asked for the same gear he had, which meant a red helmet and black overalls.

She loved going fast; she would cling to her husband's back like a tick, devotedly leaning into the turns with him. Every time they would head out, she tried to convince him that he could go faster. They were regulars at the Brno Grand Prix. From time to time she would lean forward and shout:

I don't know how I could spend my whole life without motorcycles and the Grand Prix.

They were both short, about one hundred and sixty centimeters tall, and dressed in black overalls they looked like Tolkien characters. If Adéla's ass weren't so big, you could easily mistake her for Alfons.

Adéla insisted on having potato salad as the main dish for every holiday, so she devoted all Christmas to making it – but her daughters spent Christmas at home with their children, without their mother. So on Adéla's name day, the whole family finally gets their fill of potato salad. The September celebration at Nagasaki follows pretty much the same course every year. Martina, the oldest of Adéla's daughters, gives the toast. This is followed by chaotic but standard merriment where the guests try to do outdo each other as they list off what they've done that year. Certain words get lost to the bad acoustics of the porch, and occasionally a weird sound emerges from somewhere beneath the wooden floor. Martina's husband gives Alfons an accusatory look:

You should fix the porch – or one day it'll slide down the hill, taking you with it.

Alfons waves it off, If it's lasted a hundred years...

Yeah, I know how it goes, Yesterday I had a beer with him and today he's dead? Come on.

The guests secretly pour themselves wine they've brought from home. Adéla's currant wine gives them a headache the next day, makes them sick to their stomach.

After two glasses of currant wine, Grandma Adéla breaks through the conversational chaos with a firm gesture. And into the silence she speaks, for the nth time, about the deaths of her three husbands. My first marriage was foolish from beginning to end. We were too young, both of us, but what can you do about that? We couldn't agree on anything. Not even on how long to boil a frankfurter. On top of that, a few months after the wedding we had a baby. A baby is trouble for a young couple. Sorry, Martina, but it is. We went for a trip to České Švýcarsko, not too far away, and climbed the huge sandstone arch. We weren't fighting at all. My husband was being quite sweet that day – I almost didn't recognize him. He was pointing things out to me that we could see in the countryside below, and he was so absorbed in it that he leaned out a bit over the edge. At first I just gave him a little tap. He smiled, thinking I was playing with him. Then I gave him a big tap. It was spontaneous. I hadn't planned anything out ahead. As he was falling, calling Adéla, I thought he'd be fine and come back up. I love flying and going fast. Actually, I felt sorry for him. I thought about it later many times. Maybe if he'd been yelling at me like usual that day I wouldn't have done it.

He was so sweet on that trip and he seemed kind of helpless. Maybe he's just faking it, I thought. Yeah, he's faking it. So I gave it a shot. He was much stronger than me though. Really, he should have fought back. Sorry, Martina, after all he was your dad.

The police investigated, Martina objected. He staggered, lost his balance and fell. According to the police report you wanted to help him but you couldn't, you would have fallen with him. He was so much taller than you. The whole night before he'd been drinking, so the fact that he fell off a cliff wasn't so weird. That's all in the report. And you had a daughter you to think about.

We could have gotten a divorce, Adéla continued with her confession, but this was so much easier. It was like a new beginning. When you get divorced you bump into each other occasionally. He blames you for keeping him out of his daughter's life. But he'd never have divorced me anyway... You know what surprised me? I got so much more respect as a widow. It was a given that they'd pity me. I had a young daughter. Both of us got black dresses. Everybody cried at the funeral. Even strangers I'd never seen before. Whenever I'd go out with people, everybody would start to whisper. Don't bother the widow. And also they'd look uneasily at each other. Sometimes I'd catch what they were whispering: That's that widow whose husband fell off the cliff. She was there, saw him falling, could hear him screaming her name and hitting the ground. She must have heard his bones crack! Poor thing. I was working at the post office, at the counter, and they moved me to an office and raised my salary.

(...)

Dancing with Death

As told by a regular of the Golden Hound at the bar of the Golden Hind

Even the guys over at the Gold Hound knew that in the 20th century the Germans came over to this country once and the Russians twice. I mean, they knew what was going on outside, but it's not like a German or Russian ever came into the pub. So in one whole century of the pub's existence, none of the beer-guzzling regulars did anything so bad as to get hanged or locked up. At least the barman didn't know anything about any hanging or lock-up.

On the other hand, nobody the bartenders at the Gold Hound served during the last century, had not pulled a drowning man out of the Elbe – which is just a few meters from here – or told a soldier from the *Wehrmacht*: Hey Fritz, fuck back off to where you came from. It's not like the Gold Hound beer-guzzlers didn't see on TV that the Americans and

Russians were tussling over Cuba, they just didn't worry about getting called up to serve. Sure, a few of them were handed suspended sentences for forgetting to return a wallet they found on the sidewalk, or some were hauled into court when some hooker claimed they tried to rape her coming home from the pub. But when they ordered a pint of Smíchov's finest, fear just fell off everyone and got swept under the table. Even those who had been falsely accused got some temporary relief. During the war, the Americans bombed the neighboring towns relentlessly, but only a moron would think of tossing a bomb on this little town – even on the square with its town hall and Baťa shoe store, it still feels like a village. And this old damp single-storey building, whose Art Nouveau ornamentation already fell off between the wars, not even the lowliest pawn would waste a blank shooting at its fading façade.

But dropping a bomb on a pub full of guys with their lungs so singed-through from Start cigarettes that they couldn't run twenty meters at a time, that would be a war crime – even if the bomb slid out of the plane by accident and by some coincidence fell right on the roof of our pub. But that's what it would take. Even an idiot could see the sense that it could happen – destiny works like that sometimes. At least half of all crimes happen because of coincidence. Just the fact that someone is born a criminal is coincidence.

So far nobody's died before at the Golden Hound, at least not that I've heard of. The barflies didn't cheat death, of course, but they did when they had a beer in front of them. When some of the regulars got really ill, often they'd ask to be brought to the bar since nobody dies there.

Hey, Franta, why don't you put a TV in here? Karel asked the taverner from his table by the window once, since he wanted to watch the match between Sparta and Slavia. Because, he replied, you want to watch TV, you go over to the Golden Hind. They have a TV there. And you heard what happened, didn't you? When Czechoslovakia played hockey against Russia, which was still the Soviet Union then, a customer died of a heart attack from joy when we won. When Golonka laid on the ice to listen if there's still oil flowing out of Russia, it was over. Every goal brought the heart attack closer, and it didn't matter whose net it went into. Golonka finished him. That heart attack caused nothing but problems. The guy was still dead, that didn't change, but the police investigated and the cause of death needed to be changed. His wife, who worked as a clerk for the city council, had to give sworn testimony at work that her husband died of grief at the loss suffered by our dear Soviet liberators, otherwise she'd have been fired. And the bartender caught it as well, they forced him to become an informer. Only after November '89 could people say the man at the Golden Hind died a hero – from happiness. They wanted to put a plaque where he sat. Here died a hero who knew true happiness. After arguing about it for a long time, they didn't put anything in. Epitaphs have no place in a pub. Death doesn't fit in with a pub, not even on a plaque.

The weird thing that happened at the Golden Hound had to do with Václav Fajks, the locksmith. He used to come to the pub every other day, finishing three beers each time. He never had money for more than three. His wife, Božena, was in charge of their finances – she was this huge teacher, probably around fifty, with massive breasts.

One time, Karel yelled out the window of the Golden Hound to him, Fajks, no wonder you're in a such a hurry to get home. With your wife's tits, it must be like having a color TV. Always something to watch.

Back then there were only black and white TVs.

Not for me, Fajks answered, I like medium-sized tits. And as I get older I'm more interested in smaller ones.

So why did you marry Božena?

Back then I liked big tits, I was young.

Fajks, you're nuts. You can't change something like that. That's how the world turns into anarchy. Some things are supposed to last forever.

I agree with you. I don't want to change anything – I'm changing, on my own, for no reason. I can't help it.

Keep up the good fight, Karel shouted through the window.

One of the rituals at the Golden Hound was Fajks describing his sex life. It always happened over his second or third beer. Everybody liked to listen to it since they could imagine Mrs. Božena's tits. About once every couple weeks, he'd get the message to shower up: a fresh towel would be hanging in the bathroom and on the Tatramat washing machine would be his boxers, ironed and starched 'til they could stand. Božena was also in charge of sex.

It's no fun, Fajks complained. When I'm putting my boxers on I feel like stepping into armor, that's how starched they are. But I'm so scared of Božena I don't object. I hate conflict. But, on the other hand, without that fear nothing would happen. Without Božena I'm indecisive as Hamlet. One time I picked up this chick. She was being sweet to me. And nothing happens.

Maybe your boxers were dirty, one of the listeners joked.

So I slapped her around, Fajks went on, so I'd get scared that she'd scream and I'd be in real trouble. But instead she just started to cry and asked what she was doing wrong. So, still nothing. Fajks threw his hands helplessly. Perhaps it's a good thing Božena and I don't have kids.

I felt so sorry for Fajks I bought him a fourth beer.

The kids at school nicknamed Božena the Eiffel Tower. During recess, she'd loom mightily over the kids walking past her in the hall. It looked like a scene from a farmyard: mother-hen Božena watching over her scattered chicks. She even towered over her colleagues in the staffroom. She's a head taller than Fajks.

There was talk in the town that the teacher would invite children into her office during the breaks and question them over whether their dad ever hurt their mom or vice versa. While they were in the bedroom, for instance. She never found out anything worthwhile. Parents made complaints to the principal about Božena, and she was investigated by the chief inspector of schools – but he accepted her explanation that she was just trying to see if the sex lives of parents somehow stunted child development.

At the Golden Hound, Karel, who was drunk, once yelled out the window to Fajks, asking him to explain the sexual mores of young families in the pre-fab apartment blocks across the river. That must be a big topic at home for you and that teacher of yours!

The question infuriated Fajks. Apparently, Božena never shared the results of her research into the sex lives of her students' parents. When he asked her if the gossip was true about her interviewing her students, she said it was confidential. Stop asking questions, Fajks.

The pivotal moment in Fajk's life was caused by the Major, an ex-soldier who fought with the French Foreign Legion in Africa and Vietnam. In his twilight years, he decided to return home to Czechoslovakia. His mom and sister still lived right here in this town, and had a little old cottage with no bathroom or hot water. The Major had saved up enough from his legion pay for a house with a bathroom and hot water where his mom and sister could live. He'd figure out a way to take care of himself. Maybe he'd spend the night there, but just once in a while. As a French citizen he got a visa, but at the first stop after his train crossed the border into Czechoslovakia, the police pulled him off and escorted him to a cell. They locked him up for a few years for neglecting his military service and enlisting in the wrong army.

The French couldn't have cared less. He had to have known what would happen to a French legionnaire in a Communist country. Almost all the money he brought for the cottage vanished because of the ridiculous official exchange rates Czechoslovakia used – well, that's what the warden said. His sister and mom just ended up getting a couple hundred credits to use in those special Tuzex stores stocked with Western goods. They would visit him in prison, bringing foreign cigarettes, some food, and Dijon mustard to put on the Hungarian sausages.

When he got out, they'd both died, his sister and his mother. But still he stayed in the country where he'd been born, spent his childhood, and then a few years in prison. He had

no friends or relatives. Still, even after he converted his French pension into Tuzex credits and paid his rent and gas bills, he had more money left over for beer in the pubs here than if he'd stayed in France.

He had his first Czech beer in prison and got a taste for it – perhaps it woke up his Czech genes. Beer was his last love. His first was the Foreign Legion and next came the girls he slept with while he was serving. He wasn't picky either, it didn't matter what color skin a girl had, whether they were good-looking or not, he'd sleep with anyone. He preferred the ugly ones, because he felt like they made more of an effort than the pretty ones – like they were compensating for the handicap of not being beautiful. In Africa he got obscene tattoos on his back and chest of black women in various positions.

This was a huge hit in prison – some of his cellmates also got tattoos of nude black women, based on the Major's originals. Most of these guys had never seen a black woman dressed, much less naked.

At the Golden Hound it seemed like the Major had been storing up his thirst in prison. He drank so much beer that by the last week of the month he'd have run out of money. So he tried a trick that had proven successful in prison: a beer for a show. Under the street lamp outside he'd show someone the pictures on his chest and back – only one person at a time – and that guy would have to buy him a beer.

Fajks went out with him. What's one beer? The Major took off his shirt. Fajks examined the Major's body very closely. He liked the black women. Their bodies seemed to reflect the ageing process of the Major's skin, but a little slower. The dry wrinkles didn't really affect their curves.

He must have wondered if anyone had a tattoo of Božena from before he met her. I would have wondered that about my old lady. The Major was certainly older than Božena, but the girls looked younger. Like they were draining the life from the Major's body, Fajks told us later.

Suddenly, out of the shadows, a cop runs out – just a beat cop. He's got his revolver pulled on the Major without his shirt on. His back-up pulls up soon after and they haul the drunk legionnaire off to the station.

So that night the cops start their drinking too, and they won't let the Major put his shirt back on and they're shining their lights on the naked black girls. In the end this Golden Hound barfly is strip searched to see if he's hiding any more pornographic tattoos. To really get in there and check his most intimate parts, they called over the cleaning lady since they didn't want to touch him there, even using gloves. After two hours of this, they kicked him out of the station. But before he left, they covered up all the dirty bits of the black women with band-aids, and took pictures of him like that. The Major remembered almost nothing of that

night. In the morning he couldn't figure out where he got the band-aids. I lived through combat in Vietnam and Commie prison, I guess I can survive somebody putting band-aids on me. In the morning, when cops sobered up, they destroyed the film from the camera. Just in case.

The next night at the Golden Hound, Fajks bought Major a beer and asked him what it's like being with a black woman. And Major started telling him. Over the second beer, which Fajks paid for, Major asked him if he also wanted a tattoo of a black girl. Fajks said he'd love to, but because of Božena there was no way. She probably wouldn't be too happy about a black woman on her husband's back.

Maybe that tattoo would make you so scared of Božena that you'd be magnificent in bed. You yourself said that being scared of your wife is what gets you hard.

I don't need to get any better, I'm hard all the time. I just get so out of breath I worry I'll have a heart attack, Fajks said seriously.

What if we give you a black girl somewhere Božena won't see?

It'd have to be on my ass, Fajks said. They had sex in the dark. She'd pull up her nightgown; he'd take remove his clean, starched boxers underneath the blanket. If he used the bathroom in the middle of the night, he'd pull them up. But what good was a black woman on his ass? He'd need a mirror to see her.

You wouldn't need to look at her, it'd be enough remembering her. Just having a black girl on your ass would turn you on. If you thought about her while you fuck that teacher of yours, you both might get something out of it.

Fajks turned down the chance to have a black woman on his butt. He just wanted the Major to tell him what it's like with black women every night – for the price of a beer. And the Major told him.

Sometimes the explanation only took three minutes; other times half an hour. That's life, he'd say.

The teacher soon noticed that something was different about Fajks. One beer less made a difference. She asked him what was going on. But Fajks kept his mouth shut. When she was at her wits' end, she took him to school one night. In her office she sat him down on the chair she usually had her students sit on while she interrogated them about their parents' sex lives.

Spill it, Fajks, she commanded.

And Fajks sang like a canary. He told her everything – the beer, the naked black women. For mitigation, he pointed out that he rejected the offer of a black woman tattooed on his backside.

For Christmas Fajks got one of Hanzelka and Zikmund's travelogues from Africa. Božena had taken a red marker to the pictures of the naked black women, circling their pendulous breasts, which sometimes hung down to their stomachs. For a bookmark, Božena put in a photo of her massive tits.

So on March 10th, I remember the date, Fajks sat with the Major, who for the price of a beer was telling him what it's like with a black woman. This time he finished the beer and the explanation simultaneously. Then he looked at his friend and knew immediately.

Fajks is dead! the Major screamed.

That's not funny, the bartender said.

I'm not joking, I've seen enough dead bodies in combat to know.

The following evening the widow Božena came to the Golden Hound. She sat down on the chair where Fajks used to sit. She ordered a club soda. Everybody stared at her giant tits, imagining Fajks coming out of the bathroom towards them in his starched boxers. Her voice in the silent bar sounded as massive as a cardinal's preaching in a cathedral.

I came to tell you all that I loved Fajks.

She didn't finish her club soda. She just got up and took the chair Fajks used to sit on home with her.

The night after Fajks' funeral the barman brought in a TV. They put it on a shelf behind the tap. He waited for the pub to be full, then he turned it on. Before the image of that actress Jiřina Bohdalová came on, he managed to say:

What does it matter now?