

The Boundary of the Woods by Vratislav Kadlec

Translated by Sára Foitová

Mr. Rosechafer's Sleep Issues

It was a daily habit for Mr. Francis Rosechafer to take off his name before bed and put it on the nightstand. He had always been a bad sleeper, and it was easier for him to get a good night's sleep as a nameless man, at least he claimed so. That way, there was nothing to bother him, and he was able to sleep all night, until the alarm clock, which stood on that same nightstand, went off.

He had been doing this for some twenty years now, he could never fall asleep with his name on – oh no, he'd rather sleep with his shoes on.

And so one Sunday in July, as the sun was already shining outside, shining through the open window of the family house, shining on the nameless man in his bed, who had slept in a bit, a magpie flew into the bedroom, snatched the name, which, unfortunately for him, was nice and shiny, and whizzed off towards the forest.

That was around 7am.

At 9am, Mrs. Rosechafer got up, ate some breakfast and went to water the garden. She came back to the bedroom half an hour later to find her husband still snoring; well, it was the weekend after all, and he had worked hard through the week, in his administrative job at the Ministry of Culture. However, the sun was high up already, and Mrs. Rosechafer was about to call out to her husband to tell him to get up, see it's nearly noon – but then, as if she remembered something, or forgot something, she did not call and went about her business.

And so it happened that Mrs. Rosechafer's husband only woke up as noon struck. He could already smell the soup from the kitchen, he reached his hand, still all sleepy, like every morning, blindly... and – nothing. He rubbed his eyes and squinted at the nightstand. There's the alarm clock, there's the reading lamp, the unfinished coffee and unfinished copy of *Three Men in a Boat*, but his name was nowhere to be seen, not even a single letter.

That made the nameless man in his bed a little nervous already, he peeked under the bed, then got up and groped around under the nightstand, pushed the nightstand away from the wall and knocked over the unfinished coffee, which spilled on the unfinished *Three Men in a Boat*, but he paid no attention to it, he searched the carpet inch by inch, and he was about to lift the mattress, when Mrs. Rosechafer entered the room.

What she saw surprised her, but only a little, that was just the way she was – never very surprised by anything, and she wanted to tell him to come down to eat, see lunch is on the table, ready to be served, but she didn't.

She opened her mouth, as if something was on the tip of her tongue, but she did not know exactly what, so she stayed silent. Strange, she thought, what's wrong with me today? It's as if I can't get the words out— and she shook her head, but only a little. That was just the way she was.

Then her husband spoke, and she immediately understood what was off: "I can't find my name! It's gone missing, must've fallen off the table or something, or maybe someone stole it!"

Mrs. Rosechafer wrung her hands, *that* she *did* know how to do, and said: "See? I told you not to just leave it lying there. And there you go, see..."

When the nameless man turned the whole house upside down and found nothing, he took off and ran to the police. Officer Waits was on duty, and since it was Sunday, he was not overjoyed by the prospect of having to deal with a case.

"I want to report a theft!" yelled the civilian, all sweaty and flushed – and hungry, since he had run off before eating his lunch, though that was not visible to the officer.

"Alright, but first things first," Waits tried to slow him down. "Your name?"

Well, it is not easy to report theft without a name.

It was strange: The former Mr. Rosechafer used to be an extraordinarily orderly man, punctual and responsible. Apart from that one little quirk, his undisturbed nameless sleep, he had lived a respectable, uneccentric existence. Up until yesterday, a misunderstanding such as the one he was a part of presently, at the police station, would have disturbed him greatly. He would be glad that the officer on duty, convinced this was some kind of prank, had not arrested him on the spot.

And yet the nameless robbery victim was now striding down the street with surprising lightness. He felt a mixture of elation and lethargy, a curious, swaying, confused sensation, and precious little of the usual ingredients which tended to dominate his feelings. And worry was gone altogether.

The man in question spent the rest of the day with his wife, mostly in awkward silence. All Mrs. Rosechafer was able to get out were a few comments on her husband's thoughtlessness and a few jabs, yes, he really should try and do something. She still could not figure out what his name was, and was therefore annoyed at him, but any longer discourse was blurred and suppressed by the uncertainty the woman felt whenever she tried to speak to him – or even when she just thought about him.

It was as if the very outlines of his person had suddenly dissipated, now that he lacked a name to separate him from the rest of the world.

Mrs. Rosechafer had never fully admitted it even to herself, but the elusiveness of sorts which enveloped her husband every evening as they went to bed, was the very reason that sex remained a remarkably lively component of their relationship, which had otherwise waned into dullness with the passing years. In the dark, when her husband, together with his clothes, took off his name, he became an electrifying stranger; inadvertently, he gained a certain carnal spontaneity.

However, what was beneficial for sexual conduct was decidedly not conducive to the everyday intercourse necessary for organizing things like additional travel insurance, which was a question Mrs. Rosechafer had intended to open up before their approaching vacation. She avoided her husband's look as if he were a stranger who accidentally came for a visit naked.

For his part, the nameless stranger in Mrs. Rosechafer's house felt her uneasiness and sunk into pensive silence.

He considered calling his children – he had a son and daughter, both adults, recently finished with their studies, and his son was already starting his own family – but the vague chaos of feelings eventually spat up the slush of embarrassment and he pulled back his hand, which was already reaching for the phone.

After a few sandwiches and crime shows, the couple moved to the bedroom in silence. Tonight, Mrs. Rosechafer chose to avoid intercourse with the electrifying stranger, who had unexpectedly entered parts of the day which did not belong to him, and after nearly two hours of anxious tossing and turning fell into a restless sleep. Meanwhile, her husband slept a deep and peaceful sleep, as always when relieved of the pinching name, possibly even clearer-minded than usual.

On Monday morning, like every workday morning, he entered the gates of the Ministry. Even without a name, he remained himself to a degree where no other scenario had even occurred to him.

He greeted the doorman with a nod and was greeted back in like manner, but as the nameless officer was about to walk past him and inside the building, the doorman stopped him, smiling: “Excuse me, sir, but you’re Mr. ...?”

Mr. Pike was no newcomer to the Ministry, he knew the nameless man’s face well, of course, and he had returned his nod countless times – yet today he suddenly felt inexplicably unsure.

And the man in question did not help him: “But Mr. Pike, we know each other well.”

“Of course, I know,” the doorman said with growing embarrassment, “I apologize, really, but somehow I can’t recall your name. This is just a technicality.”

“But I’ve been working here for so many years, I pass through here every single day,” the man protested as all stable terrain was slipping from underneath his feet.

The doorman was getting a little annoyed that this man was so unwilling to reveal his name and save him from embarrassment. “If you would just remind me,” he pressed a bit more insistently this time.

The man in question stared at the floor in silence for a few moments. “A man should be more than just his name,” he demurred stiffly, but was himself unsure whether he really believed it or not.

Then he turned on his heel and left.

Where he walked through most of the day is not quite clear, but his steps were as aimless as he himself was without his name. The other officers in the Department of Libraries indeed noticed that one of their colleagues was missing – but no one could recall his name, so they all preferred to say nothing about it.

We do know that as evening was coming, he was seen in the park, where he sat by the heel of the Monument of the Unknown Soldier, perhaps sensing a shared destiny. He watched the setting sun and the bats circling in the dusk, and without thinking about them as bats and the sun at all, he probably truly saw them for the first time in a long time.

He knew perfectly well where he lived, who his wife was and where he was supposed to go, but even so, as he tried to think about what he should do, he had an odd feeling, as if everything was slipping through his fingers. A rose by any other name might smell as sweet,

but it seemed absurd to him that he should continue being who he had been before. Especially since his life itself was not very memorable.

It took a completely concrete physical sensation to move him to start heading home: he got hungry, and that did an admirable job of crystallizing his existence.

It was already dark when he got to his house, and he was just about to open the small gate when the porch light of the neighbors' house turned on, the neighbor, Mr. Jerome the Engineer, stuck his head out of the door, and called: "Francis Rosechafer, come here!"

The engineer's neighbor flinched, the name sounded strangely familiar – but he knew that Mr. Jerome the Engineer was not calling to him. He was calling his dog. And indeed: the large, long-legged animal, who ran up from the garden, did have the name Francis Rosechafer. He was holding it in his mouth, covered in slobber and dirt.

Francis Rosechafer ran to his master, who patted the dog's back and let him inside. Mr. Jerome the Engineer lingered for a few moments, because he noticed his neighbor shuffling around on the sidewalk with a dumbfounded expression on his face. He wanted to say hello, but when he opened his mouth, he realized he couldn't remember that guy's name if his life depended on it – so he just nodded to him and went inside to give Rosechafer his dog food.

The former owner of the once shiny, gleaming name would have liked to eat something, too, but he took a few timid steps towards the neighbors' garden gate and stared at the Jeromes' dark porch. He reached his hand towards the bell and was about to press the button which said "John Jerome, MEng", but then he remembered the officer on duty, Waits, and the doorman, Mr. Pike. He remembered the silence of his wife, Mrs. Rosechafer – and then, he himself nameless, drew his hand back.

What would he even say to Mr. Jerome the Engineer? Your dog's got my name? – And you are Mr...? Mr. Jerome the Engineer would ask.

The nameless man lingered on the sidewalk for a few more minutes, then realized again that he was hungry, and went home. Mrs. Rosechafer was a bit surprised that he'd come so late, but not *that* surprised, that was just the way she was, and also, she had barely thought about her husband all day – well, she did, but chased the thought away every time, for reasons which are now clear to us, and in the end she did not even make him anything for dinner. On any other day, that might have been met with little understanding on the part of her orderly spouse, but today he did not care, he warmed up some sausages, ate them with some bread and then looked out the window and into the night for a long time.

He felt light and free, but still, sadness was starting to creep into the lightness – that sadness one feels when one loses something that had been weighing down on him for a very long time.

He did not really make a decision, did not really think about it at all, but he waited for his wife to fall asleep and for the surrounding houses to go dark, and then he stole out of the house. He climbed over the fence and fell into the neighboring garden. He sat on the lawn for a moment, and when he recovered, he got up and walked to the back of the house. He found a bathroom window that was half-open, and leaned the ladder that he had found behind the toolshed against the wall. First he tried to pull himself through the window sideways, he pushed one leg in, but got stuck and his pants ripped. Then he crawled in headfirst, groped in the semi-darkness, fell over and slid into the dark bathroom. One of his arms got stuck in the toilet basin and the other in the wicker basket with old issues of *Cooking in Color* magazine, now markedly faded. He hit the back of his head, but retained his consciousness

and, surprisingly, did not make that much noise. After a while, he managed to turn around, and once he was back on his feet, he realized he needed the bathroom. He urinated and flushed the toilet – not the most prudent step, considering the circumstances, possibly a trace of his former sense of order, or the opposite, a manifestation of his newly gained abandon – but fortunately this did not wake anyone up, either, so he opened the door and went into the corridor.

He had been to Jerome's house once or twice on some random occasion, and he vaguely remembered that the small hallway where the dog slept was on the right. He opened the door to his right, and in front of him, in the dull light of a waning moon, he saw Mr. Jerome the Engineer, asleep, and Mrs. Jerome the Engineer's wife, asleep. He closed the door again and headed the other way; first he peered into the utility room, then the kitchen and the living room, until eventually he found the hallway and the sleeping dog called Francis Rosechafer, who was breathing peacefully and looking as if the name was no burden to him at all.

The nameless man knelt and looked at Francis Rosechafer for a long while. He reached his wet hand, not knowing whether he wanted to take his name back or just pet the dog, and then Rosechafer woke up.

He lifted his head and stared at the uninvited guest. He did not bark or growl. The nameless man and Francis Rosechafer the Golden Retriever stared at each other in the weak moonlight. Then Francis Rosechafer licked the nameless man's hand and looked so very dog-like yet aristocratic that the nameless man suddenly knew that this dog, this magnificent gold canine, was born to bear that name, that the name fit him perfectly and did not pinch him nor disturb his blissful dog dreams. He knew it would be a crime to take it away from him.

And so the man pulled his hand back for the third time that day, got up, went to the bathroom, climbed out the window and down the ladder, put the ladder away in its place behind the toolshed, and then he stood between the strawberry bed and the hotbed and watched the clouds floating across the waning moon. He was not thinking about them as clouds and the moon at all, he felt he was a part of the night, and he might have stood there until dawn, but then morning dew fell on him and a sense of loss rose up inside of him, a loss and longing for something to weigh him down – at least a little tiny bit, just enough to keep him from being blown away by the wind.

He lowered his head and was about to walk towards the fence, but then he saw something among the strawberries. It was all muddy and grubby and almost invisible in the strawberry plant shadows, but when he bent down and picked it up, it was immediately clear to him what this was: a name.

He climbed the fence, without falling this time, got down safely on the other side, walked to his house, took his shoes off, undressed, showered and got in his bed, next to Mrs. Rosechafer. He simply lay there for a few moments, looking at the ceiling, and then snuggled up to her.

Mrs. Rosechafer turned on her side, pulled her blanket up and mumbled sleepily: "Where've you been, Spot? Your feet are as cold as a dog's nose."

The Boundary of the Woods

Well, and so Jiří Buřeň the writer whose short stories always ended with death, Jiří Buřeň who hated when people left doors open, Jiří Buřeň who always, as an exercise, simultaneously thought the exact opposite of what he felt, so that he would not accidentally slip into one-sidedness – this Jiří Buřeň was now lying in a hospital bed and vomiting in his hands.

For many long years he had played this mental game: when he was truly happy about something, he tried to think about something joyless for at least a few seconds, like the Holocaust or the dentist; and vice versa, when he was sad, like when someone close to him died, which was happening pretty often in recent years, he tried to think of a joke, just as an exercise, to gain control over the situation.

Right now, it was not going too well. He felt sick through and through, the valves of his thoughts were incompetent, and he was more or less just hoping the whole thing would be over soon. He would prefer for things to end well, to come out of this alive and go home – ideally on his own two feet, but all in all he felt he would be pretty ready to die, too.

Over the last few days, the memory of reading *A Space Odyssey* for the first time forty years ago popped up a few times – he remembered that the year 2001 seemed a very distant future, and 2015 was pure sci-fi. He really had little doubt back then that today, instead of this eighty-year-old piece of crap, he would have a beautiful robotic body that would never bother him with something as base as vomiting. Indeed, he was never too bothered about keeping a healthy lifestyle, perhaps under the influence of this expectation.

When the gust of nausea began to fade and the desire for a speedy end stepped aside to free up some space for other thoughts, Jiří Buřeň noticed the door, open into the hallway, and was immediately overcome by anger.

He had always hated unclosed doors, especially when he was lying in bed – not to mention lying in bed with his hands full of vomit.

“Why’d you leave the damn door open? That’s no better than leaving my stomach unstitched! As if you’d left me lying here with my paunch unstitched, cut wide open, literally the same thing!”

That was the wording he formed in his mind; he was eager to throw it in the nurses’ or doctor’s face – but for now he was glad if he managed to wheeze in a way to successfully communicate that he wanted some water.

He even got divorced because of an unshut door – or at least that was his ex-wife’s version of the story, told with a good pinch of sarcasm; even he told it that way, occasionally, when he was in good spirits. They got married while still in college, out of a great and undying love, and also for the permits to visit each other in the university dorms. He studied at the Faculty of Forestry, she at the Faculty of Agronomy, so it seemed they might complement each other well. Seeing as I’m only bringing this brief marriage up because of the way it ended, though, you’ve probably guessed it was not such a roaring success after all.

They only started living together after graduating, and since they did not have an apartment, they moved in with Vlasta’s parents. Specifically, to Vlasta’s childhood room, which had become the sovereign territory of their family tomcat, called Forget-me-not, while she was away studying in Brno.

The emergent triangle, complemented of course by the presence of Vlasta's parents in the other rooms, gave rise to many conflicts, in which, surprisingly, Vlasta did not take her husband's side.

"The cat's used to it," she said.

"So he'll get unused to it," he said.

Vlasta thought that was mean and unfeeling of him, while Jiří read her reaction as a symptom of her clan's servitude, which was now making a claim on the last remnants of his privacy like an over-powerful lord.

"Jiří, you've got to understand, he came in here to sleep for five years."

Jiří understood, but he also felt the cat's presence in his bed would be a negation of all his principles. Maybe at another time, another place, he wouldn't have cared, but here – this was a battle for his position. What would he be able to defend – if not his own bed? If he couldn't defend the fact that the bed is his at all? Especially since the cat's presence in the bedroom required an open door – otherwise Forget-me-not tended to jump at the door handle and wake up his roommates at any time of the night. Jiří was not able to fall asleep with the door open. He felt as if the whole world was trying to sneak in his bed through that door. "Sleeping with the door open's like sleeping with your eyes open," he would often say.

He closed the door in the evenings.

Vlasta usually opened it afterwards.

Often a fight ensued; to both of them, the other's actions seemed to be the embodiment of inconsideration. The closed door became the screen onto which all other disagreements and injustices were projected.

"Concession is the better part of wisdom," Vlasta claimed.

"That's why the world is ruled by idiots," Jiří retorted.

She felt that if he truly loved her, he would concede. He was convinced that love without principles was hypocrisy.

Vlasta fell asleep faster. Jiří then often got up in the dark and closed the door. Forget-me-not was sometimes deterred by it, sometimes not.

One night, in the middle of the night, there were loud thuds; Vlasta woke up and wanted to get up. Jiří grabbed her wrist.

"Ow, let go! That hurts."

"Don't go there."

"Stop it, goddammit, the door will get scratched."

"Stay in bed!"

"You're not gonna boss me around!"

"You'd rather get bossed around by a cat then?!"

In the especially ugly argument that followed, Jiří was informed, among other things, that people who don't like animals don't like people, either. Later, when he got a chance to think about it in peace, he had to admit there was something to that – he did in fact prefer trees.

That night, however, he saw that as a classic demagogue's move, more than anything else – and he did not skip a beat before telling Vlasta exactly that: “Well, that's just the classic demagogue move! So if I don't like ice-cream, I hate pork, right?!”

In the wake of the war, Vlasta's father, a good-hearted working-class man, took to building a bright Communist future and Soviet-style collectivized farms with great and perhaps even honest enthusiasm, and his agronomist daughter was at this point still dedicated to following in his footsteps. Jiří on the other hand was already starting to sober up. It was the early 1960s – an echo from the upcoming detonation of Prague's giant Stalin statue could already be heard between the cat's thumping on the door; that moment felt as if a toxic shard from the destroyed monument fell into their marital bed.

“You'd nationalize this damn bed from under me if you could!” Jiří yelled. “But there are borders I won't have redrawn, I'm telling you!” He wasn't quite sure anymore whether he was joking or not.

“So selfish, all you think about is you, yourself and you. Ever thought about our children? Are you gonna close the doors to them, too?” Vlasta asked – sobbing at that point.

He said something nasty back, which he never specified when he told the story afterwards, but which more or less made it clear that he did not want children. “Definitely not with you,” he said. Or with the cat, he thought but didn't say – because, for once, he did not want to make light of the situation.

The exchange of opinions continued, albeit in a somewhat less fluent and inspired manner, while he packed up his things. He stopped at the door, thought for a while, but then left it unshut – and left.

He always claimed afterwards that he went straight to the train station, though in reality he spent the night walking around the city, waiting for a sign – any sign, he had no clue what it should be – that would allow him to go back.

The punchline came seven and a half months later in the form of his son.

It's hard to know why all – or nearly all – of his short stories ended with death. It might have come from a certain desire to have control, which he lacked back then. Somewhere deep down he could not stand the idea of his characters staying alive, living their lives without him, somewhere outside of his text.

Or it was just a lack of imagination, at least that was what he himself used to say.

On the other hand, Jiří never gave much space to the process of dying. He used death as a sort of punctuation mark. It occurred to him a couple times, now that he was lying on his deathbed – that was what he called it in his thoughts, and sometimes, when his thoughts allowed for jokes, he even called it his “deathcot.” It occurred to him that he should write something about dying, but it was nearly twenty years since he finished writing anything real, and he was a proper lad back then.

So now he was sitting there, hands full of vomit, thinking that food was coming out of him more easily than words these days – shame that they come out the same way. He added it to the list of jokes he probably won't manage to tell the pretty young nurse who was rushing to get a bucket and cloth, then frowned in the direction of the door, which was open, so shamelessly open – and he saw his last great love walking through the hallway, carrying a bouquet of flowers.

He looked around, roused like a schoolboy about to get caught with a cigarette, for a place to hide the contents of his hands.

It was for Renata that he stopped smoking at sixty. She was nearly twenty years younger than him; she read his short stories, laughed at his jokes and closed doors behind her. She closed doors, finished her food, always stayed until the final credits at the movies, and always got up from her seat only after the train entered the station.

They missed their stop on their way to the woods a few times because of that. They used to go to the woods often, back then.

“Who gives a damn, we’ll get off at the next one, so what,” he said when he saw how sorry she was; she had taken a long time putting on her coat, then remembered, at the door, that she’d left her book on the seat – and the conductor was in the other car.

The small diesel train traced the round contour lines of hills, meadows and woods; picturesque villages floated by. Back then, in the middle of the 90s, there were no noise barriers flying into view like gray curtains.

Renata was on her way to go mushroom picking; Jiří just wanted to go to the woods where he first started working, back in the 60s, fresh out of college. He did not really have to think hard about where he would go on his first longer trip after retiring. Beeches. He wanted to see those beeches again. Not many mushrooms grow under them, but there might be some a little further on.

They walked along the narrow gray asphalt road from the railway towards the forest, crooked little apple trees were blushing with the dots of small, sweet, round apples, and Jiří was thinking about freedom and about death – what else should one think about, after all, at the start of retirement?

“Look, apples,” Renata said and started to fill her mushroom basket with fruit.

Jiří was impatient. They had a longer way to go from here and he had not yet managed to turn the page from the idea he’d originally had about this day.

“That’s gonna get heavy, and we still have a while to go, leave some space for the mushrooms.”

“Why is nobody picking these?” Renata asked as she was reaching for a branch over the ditch. “See how many are rotting here. What a waste.”

He convinced her that half a basket would suffice. They walked up the forest path; the spruce growth gave in to oaks and hornbeams, they ate the apples and Jiří even managed to be present. He joyfully inhaled the September air and munched.

It did of course irritate him that Renata kept stopping to pick up mushrooms. She saw them everywhere.

“We were gonna go mushroom picking, right?” she said.

He wanted to go to the beeches first. He’d thought the mushroom picking would come afterwards. They reached an intersection. He turned left, decisively, even though he was far from sure. He had only walked this route once, and that had been fifteen years before.

“If I could choose, I’d want to be buried under an oak,” he said.

Renata put another red cracking bolete in her basket and looked at him, perplexed.

He smiled. She smiled back.

“Why not? I’d like to have mushrooms growing on my grave.”

He would have liked to die in the woods. Even back when he didn’t throw up in his hands, he used to think about how, if things were really going downhill, he’d go to the woods, take some pills and just stay there, lying under a tree.

He liked to sleep out in the open. No need for doors in the woods. He would of course find a quiet place, somewhere where no one would come looking for him.

In 2011, a Japanese woman overdosed on some pills and lay in the woods, dead, for four hours. Then they found her and revived her. But he obviously had no idea about that back then.

He also had no idea that Renata would come into a hospital room one day, and after a moment’s hesitation head towards the patient on the bed opposite his. Some Mr. Kolčava, if I’m not mistaken.

“I know you,” this Mr. Kolčava had said when Jiří was brought to the room a few days earlier. “You used to work as a welder in our factory – Mr. Vimr, right?”

Kolčava, “Weasel.” A nice forest name. Not much else was left of his forest dying plans.

Maybe we should have talked about Mr. Vimr instead – welders dying haven’t been covered nearly as well in literature as writers dying. But what kind of a writer was Jiří Buřeň anyway? He had published two collections of short stories and one novel. He had planted and felled many, many more trees. He was still more of a forester. A forester whose short stories usually ended with death.

Many things were of course impossible during the post-invasion years, but it is hard to say in retrospect whether this was an excuse, more than anything, or not. The borderline between the young and hopeful and the old and forgotten is sometimes so buried in the underbrush that one really cannot tell when he has crossed it.

Nothing much grows under beeches; everything is too visible there. Golden leaves all around. Copper, more like. But he loved oak trees too. And pear trees. And birches. All trees. With the possible exception of blue spruces. He was not a fan of those.

He also was not a fan of abrupt change, of course, so it would be hard for him to get used to eucalyptuses, for example.

Vlasta on the other hand got used to things easily. She was strikingly similar to the protagonist in a novel that Jiří hid in his drawer through nearly all of the 1980s. It was also about crossing borders. Only the main character never reached Australia, since the book ended in Jiří’s style.

It was a strange moment when his adult son, whom he had buried in the novel, came to visit after the Velvet Revolution – he’d buried him and gotten used to the clear, clean ending. Karel – Charlie – never read the five-hundred-page *Outlines*, though, even when the book was finally published, because he had emigrated as a seven-year-old and only learned to read in English.

He had not announced his visit, so at first Jiří had no idea who was standing at his door. But then he was happy, of course he was, although slightly confusedly so. Back then, at fifty-four, Jiří thought life was finally beginning. His son came back; his novel, for which he had

great hopes, was published; he fell in love with a beautiful editor who was singing the novel's praises... and of course, the Communist regime had just fallen.

But the great novel was drowned out by the noise of the busy year 1990, and Charlie went back to Melbourne and only came back for a couple other brief visits, once every few years.

The beautiful editor was all Jiří was left with – her, and the idea for a great novel, for real this time. Now Jiří would finally take a big breath and shake up Czech literature. But just like his and the editor's lives did not come together and become one – they continued to live separately and get together to go to the theater, to the woods and to bed – so did the novel continue to break into fragments that refused to become one.

He had been writing it for six years already. He needed something, something he was still failing to capture...

Yes, I can finally reveal this – he did not come to the woods to pick mushrooms, he did not even come for those beeches: he came for that bit of the road over there, over a place called Šmejka, where the meadows and the woods bled into each other in a strange way. He came to remind himself of it, because it was there that the seed of his novel, *The Boundary of the Woods*, first began to germinate.

"There should be a bag in your backpack," the editor said. She was holding a parasol mushroom and trying to stuff its leg into the overflowing basket.

"I told you not to pick so many apples." As he took off his backpack, he tentatively inspected the overcast sky. They should have reached the gamekeeper's lodge by now – must've taken a wrong turn somewhere.

He took out the bag and transferred the mushrooms to it carefully. A fistful of crushed blackberries was hiding between the apples.

"Maybe it'd be better to put the apples in the backpack," Renata said.

Jiří wiped some blackberries off one of the apples. "You gotta decide what you're gonna pick."

"Why?"

"I dunno. Because otherwise all you get is mishmash."

He held the black porridge in the palm of his hand, staring into it as if he saw a portent of that day in the hospital twenty years later. He picked out a few needles with his finger and stuffed half a handful of squished blackberries in his mouth. He offered some to Renata. She smiled and licked off the rest.

Another half-basket of mushrooms later they reached a wide forest road. Dusk was not falling yet, but the heavy clouds were already night-logged. To Jiří, everything suddenly seemed logged, squishy; he knew they should start heading to the village in order to make the train, but he needed the clarification, he needed to see that unclear, slushy boundary of the woods in order to understand *how exactly* it was unclear, tree by tree, stone by stone.

They stopped.

"It must be around five, right?" said Renata.

He looked at his watch. It was. Six minutes past. "If we go down this way, we'll probably get straight down to Šmejka."

“So we’ll come here to look at the beeches another time, it’s about to rain like hell anyway, right?”

He hesitated. Then he turned to Renata, almost pleadingly.

“It should be pretty near here. That boundary of the woods. That’s where I got the idea. I really need to see it.”

Renata nodded. She knew. They had talked about it so many times. His writing was sacred.

And so they walked through the forest, he dragged her up the hills, he dragged her under the fatefully water-logged clouds, through the oaks and spruce, they passed the beeches, slender and grey, and their copper leaves and clear-cut borders, their sharp boundaries, the *Outlines* that he was determined to leave behind, drown out, he dragged her up and down hillsides and over creeks, through thornbushes and drizzle, as if the fate of Czech literature—no, of world literature!—depended on it. Renata had given up picking mushrooms, she left the orange boletes to their foresty silence, somewhere out there, the mythical boundary of the woods was waiting...

And so it was written: If you walk from the direction of the meadow towards the wood – the boundary will escape you – just that greensward and that bush and that low birch too, they still belong to the meadow, the meadow won’t give them up. The meadow is always a bit larger if you’re walking from the meadow than if you’re walking from the forest. If you walk from the forest, the boundary slides down that easy slope and suddenly, a rosehip bush, a crab apple, a strip of limp grass, sprouting spruces, a thistle – all belonging to the wood, still, still to the wood. The better, the more carefully, you look, the further lies the boundary. And if you inspected the ground along the road needle by needle and blade by blade, the whole meadow would belong to the wood.

The drizzle turned into rain, slowly, without a rain jingle, and then they found themselves above the village, by an ugly new house with a large parking garage and blue spruces and Jiří Buřeň was gazing up towards the forest in despair.

“We should’ve probably gone down earlier, when we passed that hay shack,” he shook his head.

“We’ll come back another time.”

The night had been released from the clouds.

“I dunno. I’ve walked through here so many times though.”

“You’ll find it next time.”

The truth was that as he walked through those places – as much as it is ever possible to walk through the same place twice – he passed through them and did not recognize them. He didn’t. Recognize them.

He did not want *The Boundary of the Woods* to again end with death, that seemed too easy – but *The Boundary of the Woods* did not want to end without a final period, it crumbled and stretched and stretched, all the way to the hospital room, where Mr. Kolčava was lying in his bed and staring at Renata uncomprehendingly.

Renata was staring at him, too, the emaciated old man with a buzz cut.

“I barely recognized you, Jiří,” she was about to say.

A nurse with a bucket and cloth came in right then and headed towards Jiří.

“Let’s see then, Mr. Buřeň, what have we done now?”

If he were able to, Jiří would have slapped her in response.

Renata turned away from Mr. Kolčava and her eyes filled with dread. She rushed to the nurse, started to help her wipe off the vomit. “Jiří, I’m so sorry, Jiří,” she whispered voicelessly and Jiří sank into rage and horrible sadness; he did not want to hide the vomit anymore, he would have preferred to drown in it.

She was now the age he had been back then, in the woods. They never started living together and never really broke up. It all just somehow crumbled. Things got slushy.

Some cells in the human body can apparently survive as long as seventeen days after death.

He looked towards the door – again, it had been left open – then at Renata.

They had not seen each other for two months. Is that a long time?

She still looked great.

He wheezed something. He meant: “You got a new haircut.”

“What is it?” she asked. “Do you want some water? Are you thirsty?”

Then they sat there for a long time.

She talked about some new books.

She had brought an orange.

“A bit of a cliché, right?” she said guiltily.

We can edit it out later, he wanted to say. He smiled, at least.

She gave him a piece.

He started to gag. *He started to gag and then he stayed alive for a little while longer*, that could work as an ending, he thought.

In the end Renata stood up, threw away the orange peels, kissed him on the forehead, smiled, went out of the room and closed the door behind her.

And Jiří Buřeň suddenly really really wanted it to stay open.