

***Crude Shape* by Lukáš Palán**

Translated by Mike Baugh

So we're sitting there on the railings at the playground, and I'm just swinging my legs back and forth in the air, Bedhead's doing the same, and Tortoise and Cabrito are too, and the other guys are sitting on the ground, throwing rocks at the road, and old Avar comes up to us and we tell him: How were we supposed to know? And he keeps staring at us, and he doesn't even look angry, just beat really, out of breath and sweating like a pig, but he doesn't give us a break: You really need someone to tell you that shooting at cars with a BB gun is stupid? You don't know you're not supposed to fucking do that? So then Cabrito's suntanned legs stop swinging, and he tells Avar: Watch your mouth, old man. And I just keep swinging my legs.

Avar scratches his forehead, and suddenly all his grimacing gives way to some super thoughtful look, and he walks around that green piece of junk the priest drives and we've been shooting pellets into. You damn Tartars, you broke the windshield! And it's not like we know what Tartars are, but the way he said it, all superior, they probably aren't school kids, but we aren't either – so who cares? But he keeps at it: It's not rocket science, little kids know you don't shoot at cars! He shouldn't have done that. Cabrito jumps down from the railing. Clearly he's had enough, first he stopped swinging his legs and now he's standing right in front of Avar, but he's smart enough not to sock him. He shouts, Chubbs, Chubbs, come here. And Chubbs gets his butt off the ground, tosses the rocks onto the road, wipes his hands on his pants and says: What's up? And Cabrito asks him: Did you know you're not supposed to shoot at cars? And Chubbs shakes his head: No, I never heard that.

So that's that. If Chubbs doesn't know, Avar was lying. And if Avar's lying, we're not gonna sit here and listen to some old man's BS. We're gonna jump down, give Avar the finger and ride our bikes to the granary.

In this village, news spreads at the speed of light. Sometimes faster even – I've been smacked around a couple times for something I hadn't even done yet. I still went out and did it, just out of spite sometimes, so I can't exactly blame papa for knocking me around at times. Papa is at god's mercy now, as my grandfather would say, who's also god's mercy. I've

heard people say that, but I've never actually seen it written down, so I don't know if the G is supposed to be big or small, and, honestly, I don't care. I do know, and my grandfather used to say this too, that god is great – but I have no clue if that changes how you write it. Papa's been in god's mercy for two years now, which is a good thing, because he was violent and stupid. I only call him papa because that's what Cabrito calls his dad, and Cabrito got it from Egon, who said that's how they say dad in France, and maybe it's fine there but here when you say it here – you know, like a modern guy using it in this dirty place – it's more of an insult than anything. In a month, on a Friday, Egon's supposed to come, so there'll be a storm or two and he'll come to town and we'll parley. Egon travels the world and knows enough about it. He usually gives us books he finished while he was traveling, but far better than reading them is listening to him talk about what he's seen and what happened. Like how he was in Chile and saw fitzroya trees four thousand years old. Jeez!

When I get home, my mom bursts out of the bedroom and asks me if it was me who shot the priest – I told you news travels at the speed of light – still, it's a mystery to me how the hell she knows what's been going on when she's been shut up in here all day, but I say it wasn't me, and we didn't shoot the priest, we shot his car, and I missed anyway, and don't listen to him, he's just sick of his church. I help my mom to the bathroom, give her some privacy and go to bed.

Cabrito and Tortoise come over, ring the bell and they wait. We're one of the few people in the village with a doorbell, so Cabrito and Tortoise ring again after a few seconds, I mean the doorbell is so loud airplanes could hear it if planes still flew around here. The terrible melody bangs against my eardrums, but that's the way it has to be: my mom is deaf as a post and otherwise she'd never know someone was there. It's for me, I scream, and grab my jacket. Yeah, yeah, fuck, I know – I'm rushing down from the third floor, still hearing that damn melody, and I know Cabrito's not going to stop, he knows I'm on the way, he just wants to piss me off and leave his finger on the doorbell until I open the door. And he might even like the tune, it's more fun than kneeling down looking for pebbles that are just the right size, and throwing them against the window. Although that's kind of fun too.

The guys are on their bikes. I'm too lazy to pull my bike out, and since we're only going a short ways, I climb on Cabrito's crossbar. He's kneeing me in the thighs the whole way, but I don't mind. The fields are dry and shriveled. The sun beats down non-stop on us like one big heat lamp, and we just keep going faster and faster to try to get a little bit of a breeze. Wind is just air flying the other way, Egon told us one of the first times we met. I was probably around nine or ten, and he probably said it a bit differently, talking about weather conditions, clouds actually, how there are lots of types, like twenty or so, and they all have different

names like *cumulus* or *stratus*, and it's probably a little more complicated than that, but that's what stuck in my ten-year-old noggin. I tried to impress Bedhead with it later, and he just said: Bullshit, clouds are clouds.

I like when it's windy and when it's not; I like sunshine and night-time, dust and water, and all the stuff we have enough of in this village. We don't have much of anything, but nature-wise, we've got almost everything, and I like that so I don't complain. We have apricots, peaches, cucumbers, cabbage, beets, apples, pears, melons, plums, cherry plums, and a million other things. There's a dam on the hill on the south side and the ruins of an old castle behind it, and then more and more hills. Right now I see a hare in the field. For a while it keeps up with our wheels, then it veers to the right of the road and disappears in the bush. God, it's amazing.

In one swift motion, we get off the bikes and climb up the cherry tree. We each find a sturdy branch, sit down and start picking. Look, Cabrito says, a buzzard, pointing to a tree about fifteen meters away. That's not a buzzard, replies Tortoise, shoving a palmful of cherries into his mouth. Tortoise swallows them straight so he can shoot the pits out of his butt. We didn't believe him for the longest time, but about a year ago he showed us: rat-a-tat-tat. I like to play with the cherry in my mouth, first placing it between my teeth, biting it lightly and tearing it, then rolling it on my tongue, skinning it somehow. Mainly, though, you can spit them out then, at Cabrito or Tortoise, onto the road or at a target you've made under the tree with chalk and which will stay there until the next storm.

We have thunderstorms every fourteen days in the summer, lots of big ones, tearing off roofs and carrying goats away. Mother nature doesn't show a lot of mercy here. Yeah, with these storms, I can see why Cabrito is our leader. Last year he had this great idea that when there's a storm and goats vanish, and everybody just says – The storm took my goat – and nobody asks any questions because that's just how it is, some hand from heaven reaches down and snatches a goat here, a chicken there, well, maybe we should take one too. Egon himself says you have to take every opportunity, so why not? Nobody will investigate it; the goat just vanished into thin air and you have to deal with it, as our commie mayor says. So when a hurricane came to the village at the end of August and took Avar's roof and four goats, we went hunting. I was supposed to keep watch, but there was nothing to be on the lookout for, because no one was out and the village looked like it had its tail between its legs and was trying not to piss the weather off anymore. We dragged that goat through the woods for about an hour in the pouring rain before we reached the clearing where we have our bunker, which isn't really a bunker, but some wood clumped together to keep the rain off us. I still can't figure out how the bunker never blew away. I guess we made it too good. Some

wanted to roast the goat right away; I remember Tortoise stomping rhythms like a shaman into the ground and Chubbs arguing that if we cooked the goat right away, the meat would be all wet. Chubbs can act kind of dumb, but nobody in the group blames him because he is the youngest of us and we were just as dumb when we were his age.

Stupidity isn't something you can fight, you have to let it come and go, it doesn't work in a way that can be pushed back. Egon explained it to us. The thing is that when somebody is as young as Chubbs, Pipes, Crusty or Moskvitch, they're as dumb as a sack of beets. It gets a little better, that's probably where we are now – me and Cabrito, Thumbs too, and Tortoise, Sauerkraut and Bedhead, although I think the only thing on his mind is beer. Another year or so and we'll start to peak, get smart, and we might not know everything, but we'll make the right decisions, because that's just what happens when you're that age. And then it's all downhill, as Egon says, one steep, sad, inevitable drop-off, that's why old people are so stupid, sometimes taking a dump or peeing in the middle of the room, let alone remembering what they did yesterday or the names of their children and grandchildren, and so they yell at us: William, Erik, Mitja, and we don't react because those aren't our names.

Your mind develops just like your body, Egon says. First you're super weak, then you're big enough to do whatever you want, and then you rot away like an old pepper – your brain too. That's not exactly how Egon put it, but the terminology isn't important. I found that word terminology in one of those books I got from Egon.

When I'm not looking, Cabrito hits me in the forehead with a cherry and starts chuckling. I wonder where Egon is now? And he whips another one at me. Probably on the road, I guess. Nobody knows. But it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because wherever Egon comes back from is always interesting, and everything he says is a hundred times funnier than what we hear at home from our parents – well our grandmothers and grandfathers because a lot of us don't have parents anymore, especially dads. Chubbs, Pipette and Crusty our missing theirs. And I guess Moskvitch counts too, because his dad's lost his mind. All our lives we've been listening to stuff like: Wash the dishes, feed the pigs, go for some nettles, gather wood, fetch the coal, pull the weeds, pick the potatoes, cook, clean, make the bed, grab a broom, help your neighbor, he'll help you back when you've got potatoes, chop the beets, cut the grass, build a fire, stack the wood, and on and on to hallelujah. No wonder Egon's our favorite person in the whole village, even if he's almost never here.

Cabrito is one of the few whose whole family is alive and together, except for his grandfather who choked on his pipe on New Year's. His grandmother bought him the pipe for Christmas, so it's her fault really, and she knows it, so she's been withering away ever since. It's her

own fault, that's just how it is. People here don't make excuses for anything, and when they mess up, they know they messed up – no one has to tell them. And every now and then when they get something wrong, everyone nods their head, but no one says anything because there's no need. And that's why it's so quiet here – in the village, around the village, above it and beneath it. If you concentrate, all you can hear are the pigs and goats, the cows, the chickens, the ostriches that have been in Kuntz's garden for hundreds of years without anybody knowing why or how those goddamn giant birds got there, the drunk fishermen and old ladies sitting around the square sprinkling gossip everywhere, whenever you cross their paths on the artery running through the village, from home to grocery store to the shop to the cemetery.

They say Cabrito's papa is a real Don Juan. I think he's bagged at least four women from the village, but no one knows officially. Officially he's just FOREMAN FELIX, who's in charge of two shifts at the local factory where the guys from our village, the ones without land, spend all day putting some sort of plastic bands together to send overseas in boxes to a bunch of other guys without land who will make them into cars or something.

His sexcapades are due to his wop looks, which he passed onto Cabrito, who – I'm not joking – is the best looking guy in our village. Short black hair, thicker than these forests surrounding us, sharp cheekbones, square chin, a devilish look that makes anyone weak in the knees if they give it a few seconds.

Suddenly I'm disturbed by a stream– it materializes right in front of my face. I lift my head and see Cabrito straddling the branch, dick out, pissing on the road. What the fucking shit? I say, and lean back on my branch a little more, looking up occasionally to see how much longer it's going. Do you think the priest will keep complaining, I ask, and Tortoise blurts out: I doubt it, he should just be happy I didn't knock his lights out. And Cabrito laughs. Poish, he says in Portuguese, and I say poish in Portuguese, and we're cool.

Two years ago, when Egon came back from traveling, a little after my papa had gone off to the mercy of god, he told us about Portugal and España, something about Tunisia and dates and nuts, but whatever, none of that really stuck, but what did stick was that in Portugal they say poish to everything, and that it means something like sure or yeah ok, just that everything is cool, and when Egon finishes telling us, Cabrito says: Poish. So Egon smiles at him, lights up another cig and says, You're terrible, a real cabrito, and then he explains that cabrito means little goat in Portuguese, but it also means a brat, a little misfit. I don't know if Cabrito identified with it or if he just liked the word, maybe cuz Egon himself called referred to

him that way, but it kinda stuck, he adopted it, and a couple months later it was just: Cabrito, you coming or not? or Where's Cabrito?

What are you gawking at? I hear right inside my head. So it looks like I've been entranced by that big bush of black hair, and meanwhile he's waving that bratwurst of his at me. I spit my cherry at him. Nothing I haven't seen before, buddy.

We jump down from the tree. I might head over to Ten Crowns, so go hop on Tortoise's bike, Cabrito says, and starts off towards the village without waiting for any of us.

At home I find my mom on the floor. She was at the kitchen table and she must have fallen out of her chair. I fell off the chair, she says. What the – how long have you been lying there? I asked how long you've been lying here? I don't know. I help her to her feet, take her to the bathroom and put her in the tub. I go back to the kitchen, soak a rag, mop the floor, it reeks of piss, but that's just how it is. It occurred to me that mom just isn't the smartest anymore if she doesn't even know she has to pee in the toilet. What can I say? I go back to the bathroom, fill the tub. The water pools around my mom and she looks just like it – colorless, formless. Then I push on her shoulders and she disappears completely into the tub.

That's how I used to wash your hair, remember? And I do remember how I'd stand in the tub and my mom would tell me: Close your eyes, and I'd close them and I'd feel her fingers going through my hair, and that dangerous shampoo running down my eyes, and I could almost die, my god, the stress – I figured if I opened my eyes for a moment I'd lose them, I'd never see again, and I'd have to hold onto a piece of string that someone had put out for me if I wanted to walk down the street, but it wouldn't work because the guys would definitely cut the string and put it in a circle, laughing as I went round and round, never knowing where I was going.

Then I helped mom to her feet, dried her off with a towel, wrapped her in a robe and took her to bed.

I hear Egon's coming back soon. Yeah, it's true. Well, that's nice – but I don't know what's so nice about it. My mom's always known Egon, which just means that as long as someone's been in this world, there's always been someone else. Egon's the only one who's ever made anything of himself, you should take a page out of his book. Of course I didn't fight her on that, this was something we both agreed on, and since we were in such perfect agreement, mom fell asleep straight away. I stroked her hair for awhile and then went to bed.

Awful howls. 7 am, for godsakes, I jump out of bed, look out the window, for godsakes, I go out front of the building.

The lady who lives to the right of us has opened up her gate and now we're standing there side by side, watching this dog, this mutt, just spinning around. I saw it happen, a car hit it and just kept driving, my neighbor says, crossing her arms over her chest. Ok, that's great, but what the heck are we going to do? I can't sleep with this going on. Then the neighbor to the left of us comes out, and I tell him what's going on, and this guy wastes no time – he turns around and disappears back inside the fence. The miserable thing howls more and more. That poor little dog, says neighbor one, while neighbor two rushes back out with a shotgun, and when he reaches us he says: You better look away. But he doesn't give us any time, and before the neighbor lady can turn around he shoots the dog right in the face, splattering it all over the road. Well, it's quiet now, the guy says. That poor little dog, the neighbor says. Then the three of us go back to sleep, because it's Sunday and on Sundays you sleep until 8:30. Nobody does anything with the dog; it just stays where it is to get eaten by other dogs.

When I get upstairs, mom tells me the neighbor shot the dog.

How can she know that? I mean, her windows are on the other side and she can barely cross the room. What the – ? Whatever. I go to bed and sleep like a log.

Either goat tastes awful or we suck at cooking. We ate half, max, no more, even though we did it exactly the way adults do it. Sauerkraut is an only kid on the biggest farm in our village and he's seen more than a thousand pig-roasts. Almost every Sunday, his father drags a pig into the middle of the concrete courtyard and – wham, right between the eyes. Then he and the other guys pour boiling water over the carcass, scrub off the hair, hang it by hooks from the barricade and then use an axe to chop it into a million pieces. The women take the intestines and go off to the side, singing songs and squeezing out all the shit and stuff that's in the pig's intestines, like you squeeze out toothpaste. That takes a while, and the guys know it, so they start drinking even more when the women aren't watching. But, of course, the women are still watching, and now and then one of them will shout something, usually just a name, but men aren't dogs or children, they don't care if someone calls them, especially when someone's pouring shots. By noon they're usually so drunk that if they tried to race the dead pig, the pig might win. They lie around on the bench and in the boiler room, in the laundry room, in the garage, in the gutter, all over the place. The women cook, bake, fry, smoke, jar stuff up, converse – converse is a word Egon taught me – they scrape, stew, marinate and clean. And going off with them to the sitting room is Thumbs' papa, Old

Thumbs, who's kinda crazy, and instead of doing what the other men do, he just keeps clicking his camera and making a record of everything, but even he has a sip or two, and then he starts singing some folk songs, annoying everyone, even the women. But that's just how it is.

Sauerkraut just sits in a corner and watches the whole rigamarole over and over. So when we steal a goat during the storm and drag it up to the bunker in the clearing, he says: You're going to stir the blood and you're going to hold the hind legs, ready? And everything is just right, it makes sense, we know just what to do, which is probably because, according to Egon, we're almost at the smartest stage. Crusty stirs the blood, so it won't get crusty, ha! That's why he got this job. He's the second youngest after Chubbs, so he didn't even try to talk back, he just accepted it and dipped his hand into the bucket of goat blood. The worst thing about catching and stirring the blood isn't that you have to just stick your hand into the hot ooze, but that you have to be so close to the dying goat to make sure you get everything into the bucket, you have to catch everything so nothing goes to waste. As soon as someone cuts its throat, you have to put the bucket down and catch the blood while it's spurting out. That's just how it is, and the worst thing is to look into the goat's eyes up close and see it shaking and twitching and then not shaking and not twitching. It's over, and that's just how it is. Crusty didn't object, and to his credit, but when he told us it was no big deal, we didn't really believe him because he puked twice.

They made soup out of the blood, and it was good. Only Bedhead, Tortoise and Ten Crowns ate the brains, because they are absolute pigs themselves. The skull was boiled and then skewered on a pole, because Egon said that's how they do it in America, and if you do it, nobody ever bothers you.