

In the Wild Country by Eva Grestenbergerová

summary

The therapeutic diary of doctoral student Malvína Velehorská begins with her returning home from her studies in Oxford. She finds herself on forced medical leave in northern Moravia, in a small village called Bočník—in the loving arms of her eccentric family. It doesn't take long for her to encounter trouble—on her way from the airport, she gets pulled over by the police and does not come out looking the best. At home, Malvína is reunited with her whole family, give or take a few members: her father—a local politician, her mother—a mildly autistic fan of singer Karel Gott, her grandparents—austere fanatical Catholics, and her half-cousin Marcel—an occasional alcoholic and regular provocateur. Almost immediately after her arrival, she is forced to take part in a folk-religious ritual called the Feast, which sees a clash between the conservatives, who attempt to preserve at least a remnant of the ritual's spiritual tradition, and her militantly atheistic father, who tries to do the exact opposite. Malvína's cohabitation with her relatives is a challenge. She is forced to deal with the hysterical outbursts of her teenage sister and the dismissive behavior of her even younger school-going sister, who could not care less about what adults tell her to do. She faces many challenging tasks for which school education has left her utterly unprepared. She finds herself cleaning out a pantry full of thirty years' worth of expired food while dealing with the fierce protests of her austere grandparents, who sport zero taste buds, and trying to get under control three dogs that her father never attempted to train because he was too busy spoiling them.

Through babysitting her little cousins, she becomes familiar with the local way of parenting, which consists of botany lessons, compulsory soap opera watching, constant yelling, and occasional threats of corporal punishment. She cannot seem to figure out which social class her grandparents belong to—they refuse to spend money on basic food items yet throw away one of the fat envelopes hidden throughout the house from time to time. She is also faced with the ultimate act of religious hypocrisy committed by her great-uncle, nicknamed "Saint Wenceslas."

Another central theme of the book is good old culture shock. Life in the village, or small town if you will, comes with certain quirks, from a very specific local dialect full of strange words to feudal agriculture and human-drawn plowing. Malvína also gets acquainted with local politics. Her father is the deputy mayor, so she spends time with him at the town hall, assisting him with officiating duties and with routine spying on other officials. On top of that,

there is an election campaign to be planned and a scandal involving a politician from the neighboring municipality to be handled.

After a while, Malvína starts working as a substitute teacher in the local kindergarten. She discovers that despite having a psychology degree and two younger sisters, there are severe gaps in her childcare skills. She tries to make up for them as best she can, but sometimes things just don't work out. Another skill she tries to improve with Marcel's encouragement is driving, but how could it possibly come easy to her when she hasn't sat behind the steering wheel since driving school and when she detests the act of driving itself? But life in the countryside has a flip side—a universal love of alcohol. Thanks to Marcel, Malvína finds herself at a wild garage party full of her peers, where completely unique social norms and “rules of etiquette” apply—and these largely concern the consumption of alcoholic beverages. But it's not just young people who drink like there is no tomorrow—Malvína and Marcel have to address the rampant drinking of all the pensioners in the family, one by one. In the case of Malvína's great-aunt, the situation escalates into a visit to the hospital with a broken nose. Malvína herself succumbs to this intoxicating custom at a hockey game (another form of entertainment beloved by locals), which she later regrets. Although the book is a personal therapeutic diary, we learn relatively little about Malvína herself—while we know what caused her to put her studies in England on hold, we do not know how she got to that stage in the first place. Another paradox is that, despite her education in psychology, Malvína has relatively little understanding of human nature. Her admittedly undefined but deepening relationship with Marcel is extremely confusing to her, which leads to numerous amusing situations.

This humorous novel will entertain with its verbal and situational comedy. The ironic narrative is set against a regional backdrop, with the everyday interactions of the quirky characters devolving into grotesque situations. Using hints of sarcasm, the novel shows the reality of life in the northern Moravian countryside, which, to the outside observer, can seem incomprehensible or even absurd.

– Eva Grestenbergerová