

*Translated by Alex Zucker (opening)*

The heat is so scorching it hurts even to breathe. You have to take the air in sips. Heavy, sticky heat clogs the lungs, hot gobs of spit come out your throat as you exhale. The wooden gate at U Fandy is on the verge of melting. Splinter after splinter flopping onto the stone threshold, *tsss, tsss*, hissing like a nest of vipers. The pub is about to burst into flame. A couple more degrees and *whoosh*. The whole thing will boil away. And this is late afternoon!

Inside, two small windows give onto the cracked road dotted with potholes and ill-fitting sewer covers. Hidden behind a large flowerpot with a single withered flower, the windows are covered over by a grayish-yellow curtain, brittle with lager fumes. The pattern is a brownish batik produced by specks of tobacco. But no one really minds, since the windows serve no purpose. Assuming any thirsty soul is still outside, they're too eager to get in the pub to try to peek through the window. And once they're inside, who cares what's happening on the street? There's nothing going on outside anyway. Podlesí is notorious for its boring atmosphere, overlaying everything like a thick blanket.

The pub was a shadowy place. It extended toward the rear like a long noodle—the swinging doors of the small taproom conveniently opening into the hall of the former sokolovna. It was a spacious hall, with room for twenty tables, and a few years back, they had erected a stage at one end. At the annual ball, the sweaty MC from Hradec stood up there, and when the club had a meeting, they carried one of the tables up there for Sláva, so everyone could hear.

It's Saturday and the pub is packed. Everyone is crammed into the dark and ostensibly cool interior. But even here the sweat trickles down from their ears and slithers under the soiled collars of their shirts like a startled lizard.

Bohumila stepped into the pub, blinking into the dark and smoke. She had to stop in the doorway and let her pupils adjust.

She expected the beer-soaked tables. The floor spattered with reddish vomit. The suffocating smell of overflowing ashtrays. And the eyes of the locals—watery, bloodshot from drink, whites cracked from the steady glow of the TV. But U Fandy was utterly nondescript: six identical tables with advertising tablecloths, the TV droning, the barkeep lighting a smoke as he leaned his belly against the tap. The floor spattered with boredom and apathy.

The moment they spotted her, though, the volume level dropped. Bohumila nervously swallowed. She's being a tease, she thinks, attracting their attention, the men having to fight back the urge to rub their groins. She instinctively drew her shoulders together. As long as I hunch they won't look. But she's wrong. They do look, but with unfeigned

disinterest. She isn't turning them on at all. If anything, her presence in the pub slightly annoys them, now they have to watch their tongues. They track her with a hunter's gaze, but a hunter with the grazing roe comfortably in his sights. No need to shoot just yet. They'll hold their fire. They're in no rush. They've already known for a long time which side of the bed she sleeps on, and as of tomorrow they're going to know what she dreams about as well. The locals purr contentedly after an all-day shift at the pig farm: Let the little baby bird from the city settle in, make herself at home. Add one twig to another, spit and droppings and glue it together, caulk it together, you've got your nest. Tidy up, bake up some food. And then we'll come for you.

A pair of men suddenly rose from their seats, blocking her path. She clenched the edge of the table and tried to steer around them. One of the men stepped right in her way. She shrieked softly, preparing to defend herself.

"Excuse us, please. We've got a birth to get to," Michael said politely. Josef, next to him, gave a slight bow.

Bohumila shrugged with a look of befuddlement. The men walked out of the pub and headed up the dusty road to the cowshed.

Jarda Hejl, the bartender and owner, nodded to her. He was on the tall side, with a firm, bulging belly typically damp with slops of beer. Next year he would be fifty and he'd already begun to plan the celebration. He insisted on picking out a few piglets that he was going to personally fatten up himself. Slaughtering them all, on the other hand, was too much work for one. For that he'd arranged a butcher from Hradec, though he did have his own cattle gun. He had a fondness for guns. This one made a soft, hollow sound, like it wasn't even firing, just sighing softly into the cow's brain. He planned to pay for the two large kegs himself, though he was accepting contributions for the pigs. He was surprised how expensive homegrown pork, pampered and raised with care, had become.

Bohumila nodded back to him. Would she find the courage to ask? They'd been here a few weeks now, she had to do something. Even if it was just cleaning. Or doing laundry.

Her sweaty T-shirt stuck to her back.

She was so thirsty her tongue was peeling like the bark on a dead tree. Her eyes flitted over the sign with the three green leaves. An ad for Platan beer. Did that even still exist? Whatever you do, don't start crying. How great would it be if that new girl broke down in tears at the pub! Oo, that'd be nifty. Afterward they would go racing home with the story, holding it tight against their chests as they sprinted down the stony path, so it would still be warm and fresh when they blabbed it all over the village. They might even add a few details to the story. A few extra tears here, some loud moaning there, by the time they reached the convenience store the story would be that she'd flung herself to the ground. And what would the story be like by the time it reached the cowshed, all nicely wrapped

and boxed? And then she just lay on the floor, twitching and foaming at the mouth. And then she peed herself.

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Marcela, a withered blonde with dark roots, waved to her from the corner table. Bohumila had met her at Bubble's a few times, they had gotten to talking a bit, a tiny bit, about children. Her husband beats her. There is a cowering quality to her body, even her voice. Before she starts to speak, she looks around and hunches in anticipation. She drinks. She has to drink for there to be at least some justice in the world. Because when she's drunk, she's almost happy. And everyone deserves a little piece of happiness. Bohumila sits down across the table from Marcela. The woman rattles on like a coffee grinder. Milan is great, he's just the greatest. Assembly line, odd jobs. He's helping out in the cowshed today. So she was glad to go for a beer. She's got a right to relax a bit too, doesn't she? She's exhausted, so just a little nip, Marcela nods her head. But Bohumila knows that what Marcela's really telling her is how, even just for a little while, vodka and bad beer slow down the steamroller of a life laden with loneliness and desperation. They may not stop it, but at least they slow it down, and that's the point, isn't it, that's what it's about, right? Bohumila even hears what Marcela doesn't say: Sure it hurts when I rub cover cream on my bruises. But what I see in his eyes when he raises his fist hurts me even more. Like he could never love me. No one ever could.

"So, cheers to that, right?"

Then a long time gabbing on about how hot the summer is. Unendingly hot.

Bohumila nods.

Splatter the ugliness with a splash of the hard stuff.

Bohumila nods.

Marcela evidently has been sitting here awhile, she's tripping over her tongue.

"Sorry, guess I'm rambling, huh?" she says, stopping short.

Bohumila shakes her head.

A half-finished beer and an empty shot glass sat in front of Marcela.

"Just make it two of everything?" asked Jarda when he finally made it to their table. Time had slowed down for Bohumila, stuck in the deep, watery wrinkles of Marcela's face. She never would've guessed she had been here only a few minutes.

She couldn't stomach Platan and a shot would've totally floored her in this heat. But the whole reason she'd come was to try to fit in, after all, and maybe get a job. She needed to do something, or she would go out of her mind. She needed to like these people, at least a little, a tiny little bit. It's just that, have you seen them? Bohumila with trembling

fingers smoothed out the tablecloth advertising Gambrinus. Why Platan then? She ran her finger over two cigarette holes. The smoking ban didn't count for much around these parts.

Marcela gave her order. "Make it one large and a vodka, then."

"Tea," Bohumila whispered. She had no idea why she said tea. For God's sake, tea in this heat? I've lost my mind, she thought. She swallowed hard, her tongue swelling up even more in anticipation of the hot beverage, expanding in every direction within her oral cavity. Soon it would have to start coming out her ears and nose.

Marcela rolled her eyes. Jarda didn't say a thing.

"He's going to spit in it, you know that, right?" Marcela laughed.

She felt sorry for Bohumila. Her son a retard, her husband in his cute little coat and loafers cruising the village and obviously beating her. She glanced down at Bohumila's hand. She was hiding bandages underneath those long sleeves, everyone in Podlesí knew. Everyone in Podlesí already knew everything.

Gulping down the rest of her beer, Marcela thirstily reached for the shot, but the glass was empty! Jarda hurried over with a large beer and a vodka and set them in front of her. He marked the check with two lines in the beer & shots section, ignoring the order for tea.

He was going to punish her, Bohumila knew that. She could rest assured of that. Punish. Chasten. I am a weary, grieving cow.

Her hand twitched from the heat. She could feel the cigarette smoke seeping under the bandages, tickling and itching between the stitches. Her swollen hand was practically smoked with pub fumes, just peel off a piece and dip it in mustard and horseradish. She really needed to scratch it. She would have to dig under the bandages tonight. With the cooking spoon. No. The knitting needle.

"Go ahead, drink," she urged Marcela, well-manneredly waiting in front of her freshly poured beer.

"No, thanks, I'll wait," said Marcela, and walked off to the ladies' room.

Bohumila thirstily eyed her beer. It had settled just right, the beer still fresh but no longer so much foam it filled your mouth. She could almost feel the bubbles bursting on her tongue. She should take a drink. She must take a drink. She was unbelievably thirsty. Her tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth like a piece of bread spread with honey. She pounced on the half liter, cramming the glass into her mouth and guzzling and guzzling, choking on the cool liquid, the foam running up her nose, into her hair. Bohumila gagged, spitting beer all over herself.

“Still didn’t bring it?” Marcela said, shaking off her wet hands. She went on drinking and talking. Bohumila had to avert her gaze from the beer. It made her sad. She stared at the withered flowers in the window. I’m wilting here too. I’m wilting. She turned to the tap. “One small,” she said, a resigned tone in her voice.

“Celebrating, are we?” Jarda set a beer in front of her.

Not a muscle on his face moved. She looked up at him in surprise. Marcela grunted into her glass.

Bohumila shot her a glance. What are you laughing at? I didn’t want to. I had to.

“When’re they coming back?” she asked Marcela.

“Who?”

“The kids.”

“Oh, that.” Marcela lowered her voice and cautiously peered around. “This weekend, or after the weekend, I dunno. They might stay there a few more days.”

“Wait, you don’t even know when they’re coming back? That’s great you’ve got someone to watch them that long,” said Bohumila, nodding in awe.

“Yeah, I guess.” Marcela squirmed in her chair. She knocked back the rest of the vodka, closed and opened her eyes. I’m still here.

“So how’re you doing here, you holding up?” she said, changing the subject.

Holding up? Am I holding up? If only he at least slept at night, I could let off steam in the kitchen. But he doesn’t sleep all the way through the night. She can hear him breathing when he’s awake, tossing and turning under the duvet, fully alive even at night. Am I holding up? If only I could at least let off steam in front of the cottage, but the animal is out there at night. “I’m holding up, yeah.”

“I get that it must be hard, y’know? Prague, right? So much history.”

Bohumila nodded. History, yeah. The village stucco hunters, she knew them well. Pants below the knee, sandals, mom backpack, dad fanny pack. Dashing across the platform to change trains in the Metro, overjoyed they made it.

“But it really is great here, though.” Marcela smiled at her. Why is she so sad all the time? So he beats her, so what, Jesus. She’d come to like her docile nature in the short time since they’d met. The way she sipped her little beer like it was scalding hot. The way she scratched her injured hand, lowering her eyelids like a sleepy kitten. “Beautiful countryside,” Marcela added, to cheer her up a bit.

Fuck your countryside. “Yeah, it is. Beautiful,” said Bohumila.

Marcela took a long swallow and nodded to Jarda. He deftly drew another and was almost on the way over when Marcela looked up again. He nodded lightly, set the beer down on the wet metal surface, reached behind him for a bottle of vodka, poured a shot, and placed it all on the table in front of Marcela. He looked at the empty glass in front of Bohumila. She smiled faintly.

All right then, bring it on.

The gloom inside the pub was starting to appeal to her. It obscured the faces around them, making the view more tolerable. The TV in the corner illuminated only the first few rows, whose backs were turned to her. Her eyes explored the sweaty hair, hairy ears, faded collars. She studied the men with intrigue. Beer and a glass of Turkish coffee with rum. A pack of cigarettes, swollen fingers resting beside it. The flame of their lighters flashed on the TV screen, the eyes of the stuffed wild boar on the wall reflecting a contorted image of the pub. The men looked like monsters. Her face was missing. She ought to be going. But she had to ask.

Jarda brought Marcela another shot.

“Eh-hem, there’s something I wanted to ask,” said Bohumila. I wish he wouldn’t stare at me like that, please stop looking at me that way. “I don’t suppose you’re looking for help? Someone to tap the beer, clean up, I dunno.”

Jarda glanced at her bandaged hand. She demurely slipped it under the table.

“Hey, thanks, but I’m doing all right.”

“Hm.” Her head sank.

He kept staring. He could see she was asking for it. The way she twisted and wriggled her ass on the chair. Tossing her hair. Pouting her lips. Acting like she wasn’t asking for it when obviously she was. He smiled. She was like a mouse sniffing cheese in a trap, testing it out with its whiskers to see if it’ll snap shut, then when nothing happens, sticking in its whole head. Doesn’t even notice the trap swishing past its ears.

“Look, I actually am gonna need someone behind the tap, the next time we have a party. Stop by next week, we’ll work something out.”

Marcela closed her lips tight and gently shook her head. Bohumila didn’t see.

“All right, thanks a lot,” she said.

“No problem.” *Peep peep peep*, look at our little baby bird thanking us, look at her smile, look how delighted she is to have friends around her again, Jarda thought. Maybe he’ll invite her back to the nest, for some coffee and a bilberry tart, you’re always out looking for bilberries anyway, you’re completely obsessed with them, I see you out there every day, squatting down in the bilberry bush like you were taking a pee, but you’re picking

berries and baking tarts and filling dumplings, and if you knew how to make jam, which you don't, since you're a city cow, then you'd have a good few jars of it put up in the pantry by now.