

Long Version

by Petra Hůlová



Can a woman wake up one day and say #MeToo twenty years later?

Entering her fifties, Sylvie Novak looks back on her successful career as a partisan writer and reflects on her complicated personal life. She revisits memories of an initiatory relationship with an older writer, reevaluating what happened long ago. And then there is the present: touring with her new book of feminist essays, dealing with the signs of ageing, and fighting the Invisible Woman Syndrome, all of which Sylvie does in her own way. But on top of everything, Sylvie's daughter Judita, has no scruples about standing up to her mother, and eventually plays the ultimate card against her.

Against a backdrop of stereotypes, generational clashes, and various forms of social activism, we become spectators of a struggle.

“Petra Hůlová’s novel gives us the opportunity to experience the changing of two generations, during which the younger group goes into a blind frenzy and sets off on a crusade to condemn the older generation.”

— S.d.Ch., playwright

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Petra Hůlová (b. 1979) is a fiction writer and the recipient of several literary awards, including the Czechia's highest literary recognitions – the Magnesia Litera, the Josef Škvorecký Award and the Jiří Orten Award. She studied languages, culture, and anthropology at universities in Prague, Ulan Bator and New York, and was a Fulbright scholar in the USA. Her first novel, *All This Belongs to Me* (2002), won the Magnesia Litera Award for Discovery of the Year. The English translation by Alex Zucker won the ALTA National Translation Award. Her fourth novel, *Plastic Three-bedroom* (2006), won the Jiří Orten Prize for the best work of prose or poetry by an author under thirty; Alex Zucker's English Translation won the PEN Translates Award. Hůlová's fifth novel, *Taiga Station* (2008) won the Josef Škvorecký Prize. In total, her novels and two plays of hers have been translated into more than fifteen languages. She lives in Prague.



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Long Version, a novel by Petra Hůlová

Translated by Alex Zucker

Can a woman wake up one day and say “#MeToo” 20 years after the fact? Or is “#MeToo” a right reserved for the younger generation? An extraordinary novel about feminism and the culture wars in everyday life. Plus, reflections on the state of Czech publishing and the literary business, including working conditions for authors.

The novel opens with the protagonist, Czech author Sylvie Novak, looking back on the start of her friendship with fellow writer David Karel, years ago, when they first met in a dingy underground club, at a party hosted by Sylvie’s publisher, Oto. A year later David publishes his debut novel and asks Sylvie to write a short introduction. Now, in return, he is attending the launch of her new book of essays, *Extraterrestrial Girlfriends*, which David describes as “a summary of what is most interesting in the current gender debate.” Sylvie sees this as an “unimaginative characterization.”

Sylvie and David leave the party together, taking a taxi partway, then walking. Sylvie notes that David, “a privileged white heterosexual,” living mainly off his inheritance from his deceased father, writes some of the best work coming out in the Czech Republic these days. He is mainly a provocateur. She agrees with him that the most important thing is to force people to think and everything else is secondary. “Half of our gender’s tragedy comes from the fact that you can rape us,” Sylvie tells David.

Sylvie reflects that women’s self-determination, which her book sings the praises of, is impossible until the two parts of the “gender tragedy” are resolved. 1) The fact that women can be raped means they don’t have control over their own lives, and 2) the life that arises inside them doesn’t wholly belong to them either, although in her new book, “I describe the process of coming to terms with abortion primarily as ‘liberating oneself from the absurd criticisms forced on one by one’s surroundings.’”

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Sylvie wakes up at Oto’s, waiting for him to bring her breakfast in bed. They have been sleeping together for years. In public they “pretend” to be sleeping together, publisher and author, since nobody knows they actually are. Sylvie reflects on the literary business, noting that, “without state support, translations of Czech books abroad basically aren’t published.”

When Sylvie goes to meet David outside the university, he is waiting along with “a buxom brunette” named Edita. David tells Sylvie he has left his publisher, Radler, because of

Sylvie's pointing out their shabby practices vis-à-vis authors. "As if Radler weren't living off its authors, but its authors off them, and at their expense." He's going to publish now with Oto, just like Sylvie. David is texting with his wife, Marie, and says she wants to talk to Sylvie, because she thinks Sylvie can talk him into having kids with her.

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Sylvie reads a review of her book and reflects on her relationship with her children, noting that when they were little it was a battle every time she left the apartment to work at night. A critic named Lipová wrote that *Extraterrestrial Girlfriends* is the year's best book of essays, praising its "intellectual maturity" and "objective, readable style" in comparison to Sylvie's previous work, the novel *Square in a Circle*. Sylvie says it makes her want to laugh and cry at the same time. She reflects that her mistake is she has worked hard to grow in her work, and unconsciously assumed critics and readers are doing the same, moving toward "a greater willingness to understand the complexity in my texts, as opposed to just my supposed 'complexes,'" as Lipová put it.

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Sylvie comes home from food shopping to find a box of her old journals splayed out on the floor by Judita, who says the contents are "scandalous," whereas scandalous for Sylvie is the fact that her daughter poked into her private journals. "We have a right to know who you are," Judita says. Sylvie reflects, "My children's idea of where their never-ending rights end never ceases to fascinate me. Do they not believe I have any rights, or do they consciously not give a shit?"

Judita: "How come you never told us about this?"

Sylvie: "I don't know what you're talking about."

Judita: "Everything in these journals. How you fucked absolutely everyone."

Ondřej, Sylvie's son: "More liked everyone fucked mom, sis."

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Sylvie sits down and, after giving her kids "a short lecture on the irrevocable loss of trust due to spying on my private affairs," offers to answer whatever questions they have. Judita breaks into tears.

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The next time Sylvie sees David, all he talks about is the fact that Marie is pregnant again. Three years ago they bought an apartment in Poland for the price of a new car in Czechia and he's afraid he and Marie and two kids won't fit into it. They go there in summer and he goes for two or three weeks at a time during the year to write. He asks Sylvie to tell Marie the next time she sees her that David wouldn't be able to handle another child. Says she'll take it better coming from her.

*

Sylvie and Oto meet to go over the program for her tour together with David. He asks if she's ever had a thing with David. "No, not even when I was young." They smoke a joint. Oto says they'll go first to Brno and Ostrava, then Krakow and Warsaw. The Poles are paying for the trip as part of a celebration of the 900th anniversary of birth of Kosmas, who wrote *Chronica Boëmorum*, the first chronicle of Czech history and turns out to have been born in Poland.

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Back home, Judita asks Sylvie if she cared that Jan Síra, a famous older writer she had sex with when she was young, had a year-old daughter when the two of them slept together. Judith says her blocked emotions aren't surprising given her traumatic experience.

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Sylvie meets with Marie, David's wife. Asks if she agrees that there's lots of funny movie scenes where a man gets slapped by a woman, but a funny scene where a woman gets slapped by a man is hard to imagine. Marie wants Sylvie to talk David into her keeping her baby.

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Visiting Oto to make plans for a joint book tour with David, Sylvie finds a pink hair scrunchie under the bed that she recognizes as belonging to a young woman named Ema and realizes Oto is also sleeping with her. Feeling betrayed, Sylvie asks why Oto didn't tell her. He says he didn't tell Sylvie about Ema, just as he didn't tell Ema about Sylvie, because he "didn't want to complicate things." Plus Sylvie would have made fun of him and Ema never asked. Sylvie points out that he used to tell her when he slept with other women.

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Sylvie and David ride the train to Brno for the first leg of their tour. In the dining car, Sylvie notices the woman waiting on them has her first gray hairs. "Sometimes even women who are barely thirty have them. The ones over fifty all color their hair. People think it's because they don't know how to age. What if it's not about accepting old age, though, but a desire to stay in the game? Colored hair is a signal to the world, like plastic surgery. A way for a woman to make clear that she still has an interest in 'doing it,' so much so that she's willing to have her face cut up. That's why plastic surgery is sexy, even though it's creepy."

"Do you realize Síra abused you on a regular basis?" Sylvie's daughter asked her the night before. "He has to apologize, and not only to you. He has to admit he treated you like a predator. It's the only way things will ever change." Sylvie replies that Jan is 77 years old and she doesn't feel the need to revisit the whole thing. Judita insists it doesn't matter that she did everything with Jan voluntarily. "Because if he hadn't been who he was, you wouldn't have let him do it. And he was well aware of that and counted on it." Then she shows Sylvie the page in her journal where she wrote exactly that.

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At the event in Brno, a young woman in the audience asks Sylvie what it's like combining creative work with childcare and does she have any recommendations. Sylvie asks her why she doesn't pose the question to David too. Reflects that her idea of feminism "arose more than thirty years ago in the study of Jan's wife Klára."

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After their event in Ostrava, David tells Sylvie that Marie called and is going to get an abortion. "I think I'm supposed to talk her out of it. And in my opinion she knows that and is counting on my trying it." Sylvie tells David ("The words come out of me like it was someone else saying them"): "Don't forget about yourself. Your work. You can't live without it. With another child it'll be even harder than now."

"That's the total opposite of what you were saying a minute ago," says David indignantly. "You're giving me advice when you still haven't come to terms with your own abortion?" But, Sylvie reflects, to assume that our own mistaken decisions can serve as a guide for the decisions of others is sheer presumption.

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After the event in Krakow, the moderator, a young Polish poet named Piotr, invites Sylvie out for a drink, and they end up on a park bench with a bottle of wine. Sylvie is attracted to him, but wonders if he is going to rape her when she notices the knife in his hand that he used to open a bag of chips he bought with the wine. Though he absolutely "doesn't seem the type."

She remembers the first time she slept with Jan, when she went back to his apartment, and after they had sex she noticed his wife Klára's study, with its walls full of books, and felt both triumphant and awful because she knew his wife, an older woman, didn't stand a chance against her as a younger woman, yet it was a crucial moment, because it gave her the idea that women need to care for other women as a fundamental feminist principle. Sylvie reflects that most women, sadly, don't realize this until they're older, so they can only expect younger women to treat them the same way they treated older women when they were young.

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Marie makes up her mind to get the abortion and David is relieved. After the panel in Warsaw, Sylvie and David go for a TV interview and while they're in the studio Sylvie gets a text from Judita saying, "Síra agrees to a visit from you." Sylvie is furious. "I pull my phone out of my pocket and in a few sentences formulate something approximating the basics of good behavior."

Before she and David go on, they agree to make it "scandalous." While they wait for the moderator, Sylvie reflects on Marie's decision to get an abortion. "I sacrificed my unborn child in order 'to become something.' My own mistake, which can't be blamed on my mother,

was that I didn't consider a child part of my self-actualization but something that prevented me from achieving it."

*

Sylvie returns home from Poland to find the box of her journals, clippings, and old photos still open in the middle of the kitchen floor. Judita says she read all of Sylvie's journals, and "It's time you finally saw things the way they really are." Sylvie says there was no abuse, Judita insists there was. She says if a guy did to her what Jan did to Sylvie, Sylvie "would beat the guy half to death."

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Sitting in a pub with David and a group of mostly female students where they've gone for a seminar instead of doing it in a classroom, Sylvie reflects that "The draining of money out of literature goes hand in hand with its feminization . . . just like in every other area of life. Men still support women more often than the other way around, so they can't afford the low pay that exists in literature."

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Sylvie meets with Marie, who is clearly upset at having had the abortion. She says David "told me the abortion was your idea, Sylvie." David doesn't answer Sylvie's calls.

*

David texts Sylvie that he and Marie are separated, but he sees their son Hugo every other day and their relationship hasn't suffered. He didn't answer the phone because he was writing, he says. Sylvie has seen him only once in the last few weeks—with Edita, one of her writing students, getting out of his car in front of the school. She had noticed Edita's papers getting better all of a sudden, and realizes it's because David has been editing her work. Sylvie asks Edita, who is also Jan's daughter, to come see her in her office. At the end of the meeting, Edita declares, "I know it was my father who actually wrote your first novel."

*

Sylvie visits Oto and he says her book is selling well. A critic named Hníková calls it "the cult book of the new feminism." As for the new book she's working on, about survivors of the climate apocalypse who live in luxury bunkers, Oto declares it anticapitalist agitprop. Sylvie says the left is a blind spot of Oto's, as it is for most former members of the anti-communist underground, and that "the importance of the Czech underground doesn't reside in its politics of struggle against communism, but in the creative community it formed, independent of the state to a degree hardly imaginable in society today."

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Sylvie gets a text from Marie saying, "David actually loves you." Which Sylvie describes as "a lie so egregious that under certain circumstances it might even be true." She asks her son Ondřej if he's heard from Judita, since she isn't answering Sylvie's calls, and when Sylvie

texts, Judita only writes back asking when they are going to see Jan Síra. She adds that if Sylvie continues “to ignore the reality” she will go see him by herself.

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Sylvie goes to see Oto. Someone told his wife Žofie about his affair with Ema. He blames it on her. Says they can’t go on anymore. Says she’s stalking him. She should get help. Sylvie knows she should get up and walk out but keeps arguing.

*

Visiting her mom, Sylvie remembers how Oto said she should “seriously get treatment,” because her need for sex at age 52 was pathological and he “refuses to satiate it” anymore. Then, before she left, Oto whipped out a printout of an email Edita sent him, claiming that Jan wrote Sylvie’s first novel. Oto reminds Sylvie: “You and Jan yourselves said you didn’t write it, remember?” She objects: “We were just kidding.”

Oto: “Here it is, in black-and-white. He told her himself he wrote it, and she’s considering going public with it.” Sylvie objects that it’s one person’s word against another. Oto threatens her that if she doesn’t stop accusing him of sleeping with other women, he’ll go public with Edita’s claim that Jan wrote Sylvie’s first novel.

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Sylvie sees Judita for the first time in a week, and Judita says she contacted Jan. Wrote him a letter demanding that he publicly apologize to Sylvie for what he did, but she hasn’t sent it yet. She says there must have been other women Jan took advantage of.

*

Sylvie runs into David on the street. He’s excited about his new text, which he describes as “a clean break” with his previous work. She wonders if he knows about the email Edita sent to Oto. David tells Sylvie that Jan got fired from his job at the institute for his political views, not because of sleeping around. Says he is getting along with Marie and they only see each other to hand off their son. “She’s right that I’m a dick. It took me a long time to admit I was trying to make myself into something I’m not suited for.” Family, kids, relationship. “I need absolute freedom, and as soon as I feel like somebody’s criticizing me for it, I lose control.” Sylvie asks, “What do you mean?” David: “I was bad to Marie and I regret it.” He stops and looks at her. “Didn’t she tell you about it?” Sylvie asks, “Did you hit her?” Tells David her daughter and son think there’s something between the two of them. David doesn’t react.

Sylvie speaks at art opening for a gay artist friend of hers, and meets Adam, an expensively dressed architect who studied in Berlin and has an office there. Looks to be under 30. Sylvie is smitten. He walks her home after the opening, but her hopes of sleeping with him are dashed when he jokes, “I didn’t know you were a cradle robber.”

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After a few more failures with younger men, Sylvie starts using a gigolo service recommended by her friend Irena. One morning she wakes up in bed with a gigolo when Jan calls, saying he bought her latest book and heard from Judita, who said she wants to interview him for a school assignment. Sylvie knows that's not the real reason Judita wants to meet.

She remembers the time she blew Jan in a movie theater with him stroking her head and saying every man is a pedophile at heart. He was joking. Jan's friends would wink at her and she'd wonder if they knew. Judita said it was part of the "psyche-out" that "fucked her up." When she hears him sigh her name over the phone, "something deep inside me trembled. Something inside melting like an iceberg, and the methane from the melting permafrost is like a gust of feelings that was hibernating inside me." She notes that he once told her, "You can do better," and "He was the first person who ever believed in me."

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Irena, Sylvie's friend, who works as a therapist, tells her that the reason Edita told Oto that Jan wrote Sylvie's first book is because she's jealous of her. "She's jealous of what she doesn't have. She wants to humiliate you. Either forget about it or prove she's wrong."

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Sylvia and Judita show up at Jan's apartment. He introduces them to a young woman, Sára, who from the way she's dressed, "obviously doesn't work in culture." Jan introduces her as his wife. Asks what Judita wants to know. "About your latest work," she replies.

Jan, who received the national literature prize for his last novel, says he feels increasingly liberated from the expectations of critics and readers, writes basically for joy, and unlike when he was young, no longer forces himself to write. "It's my report on the world as I see it." Says he's mainly interested in language.

Judita: "I thought the point of a book was to say something."

Jan: "Of course, but meaning is born from words and that's what makes a text rich."

"Rich?"

"Imagine a jungle. A wild jungle of meanings and metaphors."

"To me that just sounds like ducking the question, not to mention old-fashioned."

Sylvie observes, in her thoughts: "My daughter has predator's eyes."

"What have you actually read by me?" Jan asks.

Judita doesn't answer the question. Before they came, Judita told Sylvie she only needed to read a few excerpts to see that Jan's work was lacking in any insight.

Judita says, "The first time you slept with my mom, she was wasted and you knew it." Jan says they drank all the time, so he doesn't remember. Sára shouts that Judita is falsely accusing Jan.

Judita asks her, "Were you there?"

Sylvie parries, "Were you?"

Judita says, "It's the principle, Mom. Plus there are your journals. You're scared shitless of him. After all these years. Just look at yourself."

She asks Jan: "What did you have that was so important you couldn't accompany my mom to the hospital for her abortion?"

"He didn't know, don't be stupid," says Sára.

Jan says nothing.

Sára: "Didn't you hear your mom? Didn't you hear her say he didn't know?"

Jan: "Your mother knew very well what she was getting into. We both wanted what happened between us. No one forced her into it. I helped her to believe in her talent. And I supported her financially, too, in case you're interested."

"All the worse," says Judita.

Sylvie thinks: "I feel a sting somewhere inside me. A shame I never felt before. Something between me and Jan ended only now and I deeply regret it."

Judita: "You made her into a whore."

Jan: "I loved her."

Judita: "You were 25 years older. She was 17. You had power over her. You took advantage of who you were and how old you were."

Jan: "She was of age. I didn't break any law."

Judita: "She never got over it."

"Evidence," says Jan. "As far as I know, your mother is a successful writer."

"My mom is a wreck, you asshole."

Judith yells at her mom not to be a coward.

"It's time to go," Sylvie tells her daughter.

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As she walks onstage to receive a prize, Sylvie remembers a time when Jan kissed her on the neck from behind and fireworks went off in her head. That was thirty-five years ago, almost to the day. "Somewhere in my head, and in all my being, something fundamental to my life happened, and Judita claims that it marked her forever too."

In her speech, Sylvie says we thought that once there were McDonald's everywhere, there would finally be a world of peace and justice. McDonald's was undoubtedly better than the Holocaust and Communist concentration camps. That was how Jan's generation looked at it. Just like a lot of young progressives today believe that for anything fundamental to change, we have to attack without compromise and subject the disobedient territories to a new regime. She rejects the tendency of women to underestimate themselves, pointing out her success as a writer, and "proudly noting that I am the mother of two adolescents, with the words 'Every day I learn something new from my children.' "

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Sylvie visits her father to see if he has the manuscript of her first novel, which was inspired by him. When she finds it, all she can think about “is the relationship between the manuscript and Jan’s green pen. There isn’t the slightest doubt about the relationship between the green ballpoint and my text, and it does nothing to change the relationship between my father and me.”

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Judita doesn’t come to see Sylvie get her prize. Her son Ondřej sits in the audience with his boyfriend Marek, and next to them her mother. “Prouder than anyone.”

“The greatest gender crimes have nothing to do with illegal behavior,” I say to the packed auditorium, “but with biological givens, which my feminism has proven itself to be absolutely powerless over.” She thinks about the letter she saw that Judita wrote to the three colleges where Jan teaches. The other women she met with who Jan allegedly abused. “His wrongdoings have had a profound influence on all his victims, and he has expressed no regret for his behavior,” says Judita’s letter. But, Sylvie thinks, what if only half of that is true?

At the conclusion of her speech, she returns to “the two halves of the gender tragedy: the fact that women can be raped and the lot, or gift, of conception. In fact those are only two-thirds of the gender tragedy. The last third is aging. As a woman desiring love, I am invisible to men no matter how I look or what I’ve been through. And for a brief, intoxicating moment, when I’m capable of a generous detachment, I try to see this fact in the only sensible way—as an opportunity for my own newfound freedom.”

-END-

Excerpt from *Long Version*, a novel by Petra Hůlová (2023, Argo)

English translation by Alex Zucker © 2023

One of the audience questions I got in both Brno and Ostrava—namely, how do I combine my career with childcare—is one of those that I've found the most annoying now for years, because time and again I have to debunk the stereotype that children and work are essentially antithetical to each other and you have to either make a radical choice between them or figure out some complicated compromise. When the reality is that one grows organically out of the other: each of them has kept the other one from driving me crazy.

The answer I gave onstage during the panel in Kraków, surrounded by backlit enlargements of pages from the *Chronica Boemorum* by Cosmas of Prague, was obviously surprising to a lot of people, but what's occupying my mind now is the encounter I had with Kanda the day before yesterday. Irena is right that I only come into my own when somebody says something mean to me. "That's why you put up with Vladimír belittling you as an artist for so long," she once remarked as I was listing off all the bad qualities of mine that I believed made it impossible for me to sustain a regular long-term partnership.

Onstage, David elbows me that it's my turn. "In *Extraterrestrial Girlfriends*," the young Polish moderator says, repeating his question in a slightly aggrieved tone, "you also address the subject of rape. You refer to it as the most heinous crime, insisting that until rape is eradicated we can't even begin to talk about equality between the sexes. I'm curious how you imagine what that might look like in practice."

David gives me a wink, since we were just talking about this on the train ride here from Ostrava. If inequality between men and women is the result of men's greater physical strength, then equality is an unattainable ideal, which we can always strive toward, but are unlikely ever to attain.

“It probably won’t work without the death penalty,” I say, and David declares to the audience that he considers the death penalty inhumane.

The moderator, a young Polish poet and feminist named Piotr, asks David what exactly he means by inhumane, and I make a mental note that the marriage of ideals and radicalism is alive and well in Poland, even to the left of the Catholics. The backlighting creates a halo of dust floating around Piotr’s head. I wonder how many events per month the Kraków house of culture does and how much they pay the poor cleaning lady for her shoddy work. I thought David had the same soft spot for Poland as I did, but lately he’s been talking about his apartment in Kłodzko exclusively as an investment. He says that’s because, now that he’s spent more time here, he’s had a chance “to get to know it better.”

While David engages in passionate debate with Piotr, I feign something in between a headache and deep reflection. Try as I might, I can’t concentrate, since I haven’t had sex in over a week. Instead I entertain myself by imagining myself as someone who will never give “it” up, even though most people seem to believe that women and sex don’t go together after a certain age. The process of transformation from girl to woman requires the mastery of certain behavioral strategies. To learn takes years, and no sooner does a woman become confident in this regard than the whole thing, basically without warning, stops working overnight. It doesn’t last much longer than a top athlete’s career, the difference being that athletes, unlike women, generally prepare in advance for what will come afterward. Irena insists the frequency and intensity of my needs is only a symptom of illness in the eyes of society. And I’m not the only one, it’s just that women don’t talk about it.

* * *

Later that evening Piotr told me that he thought I was meditating during our discussion, and in a way he was right, although everything playing out behind my closed eyelids, apart from my thoughts concerning sex, began and ended with Ema's pink scrunchie.

After the event, the young poet Piotr, originally from Gdynia, invites me out for a drink. The only place in the neighborhood worth going to is closed, he says, so we end up sitting on a park bench with a bottle of wine.

Standing by a low wall not far away are some youngsters drinking beer, and it's a strain bending down for the bottle stashed in a paper bag under the bench. We talk about the usual. No one in Poland gives a shit about poets, Piotr says. I speak highly of Polish criticism, since even when it's negative at least it lacks the personal, toxic barbs and condescending tone so typical of Czech reviews. "That's because you're not from here," Piotr says, then he asks how I know his language. I went out with a Polish man for a while, I explain, plus when I was in high school my friend Irena and I hitchhiked all over Poland. I tell the story of our adventure to the Baltic Sea, when we got soaked in the rain and a Catholic priest in Toruń took us in. Piotr asks what I think of Polish men. Tomasz was great, I tell him, and I think to myself: If I hadn't slept with Hrbek that one time instead of him, if I hadn't gotten so wasted at Oto's birthday party beforehand, and if Tomasz hadn't confessed the day before to being unfaithful to me, I might never have gotten together with Vladimír that night. Instead Tomasz would have brought me back with him to Gdańsk, where he fled in disappointment after we broke up. "Generosity," I say when Piotr asks me to name the quality that impressed me most about Tomasz. The night is turning chilly, and Piotr takes off his jacket and throws it over my shoulders. I wonder what he's hoping for from the two of us being together like this. I gave him a copy of the Polish edition of *Extraterrestrial Girlfriends* with a personal dedication after the event. He defended me against David like a lion up onstage, even though as a

representative of the male gender the threat of a death sentence for rape applied to him too, in theory. The idea of Piotr being a rapist was comically absurd.

I take a look around. The park is sinking into darkness and the teenagers drinking by the wall are gone. I suddenly realize I won't be able to find my way to my hotel, since I left my phone in my room and the whole way here Piotr and I were engrossed in a discussion of plus-size modeling, which we both agreed was nothing more than a slight correction in the cult of feminine beauty, with no real impact—in other words, I had paid absolutely no attention to where we were going.

Only three streetlamps in the whole park work. One flickers over the asphalt sidewalk's humpy surface, dotted with bubbles sprouting grass. David, who, unlike me, had already lost his soft spot for the East, would have described it as pure-blooded Russia.

I suggest that Piotr walk me back to my hotel. It doesn't escape me when he slips in the fact that he has to be somewhere tomorrow morning at eight, and whether it's true or his way of hinting it's time to say goodbye, just to be sure I state flat-out I still have work to do tonight.

He smiles.

"If I read you something now, would you tell me what you think? It'll only take a minute," he says, and I notice his not even thirty-year-old face is almost as smooth as my teenage son's.

"Will you be honest with me?"

I nod.

It goes without saying I'm incredibly attracted to him. Just as one day youth suddenly tips into old age, about ten years ago, almost overnight, I started to find myself drawn to younger men. I knew there was no point in acting on it. That was a no-go as far as I was concerned. Because the one thing I'm worst at in life is handling rejection.

Piotr reads me a love poem, which I barely understand half of. I enjoy reading Polish poems in the original, not because I understand them so well, but precisely because since I don't, I can let my imagination run wild. The real translation is usually much more boring than mine.

Now the whole park is plunged into darkness. Even the Žabka behind the trees where Piotr popped in earlier for a bag of chips is closed. When I was little, potato chips were a holiday treat that my grandmother bought only at Christmas. She passed away at the blessed age of ninety, and when she was just over eighty, a young man about Piotr's age mugged her in the park on Letná in Prague. My mother always liked telling that story, since supposedly my grandmother had claimed, with a blush, that the man was after more than just her purse.

My flirting with fear turns to actual fear the moment I catch the glint of the knife in Piotr's hands, which he used to cut open the bag of chips. No matter how unlikely I realize it is, I can't shake my misgivings. Besides, not only don't I know how to get to my hotel, but I don't have the slightest idea where we are.

My comparison of Piotr's verse to the poems of Bargielska's sits well with him, though, and he even declares, to my delight, that it makes him proud to hear.

“Rooms with souls inhabited by soulless people, all of them connected by unfulfilled love,” I say.

“Just like in life,” Piotr adds. He asks if I'm cold and smooths the coat he loaned me tighter around my shoulders.

Another idea for a novel suddenly comes to mind: a day in the life of an aging woman, concluding in the company of a charming young man. Although rationally the woman regards her uneasy feeling that the young man's favor is part of some conniving plan as merely a manifestation of her paranoia, ultimately her intuition proves to be correct. But I would leave the ending open, so it could also be interpreted in the reverse sense, I explained.

Taking my hands in his, Piotr confides that it's been ages since anyone understood his poetry as well as I do. I chalk it up to my bad Polish, and add that if I were a native speaker I'd probably be more critical.

“So what you said about them a moment ago, that isn’t really true?”

Looking into Piotr’s eyes I see myself, cheeks burning, as I hand Jan the envelope with a few of my hand-scribbled pages. We talked about literature constantly, but the fact that I myself wrote was something I kept secret from Jan for a long time. I looked at Jan then the way Piotr is looking at me now. There was roughly the same difference in age between us, the same division between someone who’s experienced and someone for whom the writing life is still just a dream, although it was true Piotr had already published a thing or two.

“Bardzo mocna poezija,” I tell him.

The first time Jan invited me over to his place, I agreed without a moment’s hesitation. We stood in his cramped kitchen, over a table so small it was hard to imagine him, his wife, and their daughter all sitting down to a meal at it, especially with Klára’s workspace reducing the partitioned space to the size of a hole-in-the-wall. It made me feel embarrassed. With emotion in his voice, Jan shared how much he wished that he himself had written my fragment of a text about a journalist from the ’70s, inspired by my father. “Don’t ever give up,” he told me.

“Your writing,” he whispered, “is absolute magic. I’ve been waiting years for someone like this.”

“Come here,” he said to me, sitting down at the table. Jan’s books occupied a place of honor in my mother’s library, and I couldn’t stop thinking what she wouldn’t have given to ask him even just a few questions. Meanwhile that whole day had happened without my even trying that hard. As I sat down on his lap, Jan slid his hand up under my T-shirt, groping and squeezing my breasts. A few moments later he carried me to the couch, and wrapped in his

arms I fixed my eyes on the crumbs on his little daughter's bib, draped over the high chair's back.

Piotr tells me how much he sacrificed to write his first collection of poems. He had a job at a bakery where they worked in shifts, so the only time he had to write was midnight to four a.m. He came home from work and went right to sleep, so he had no social life. It was obvious that he was alone and desperately longed for intimacy.

After Jan got off, he stood up and hid his daughter's bib in a drawer. I got up from the couch and took a few steps, and peering through the bedroom door I noticed the huge double bed, but what really got my attention was something else. Behind me Jan had launched into washing the dishes, the same way Oto often did after we had sex. I stood on the threshold of Klára's office, gathering up the courage to step into that miniature temple to the intellect, filled with books and file folders. A typewriter dominated the small desk, beads hanging off a hook on the side, lipstick lying next to a stack of carbon paper. I pondered over how badly Jan's wife wanted to be beautiful for him, yet didn't stand a chance next to me, and I felt a sense of triumph and misery at the same time. An ethical principle began to take shape in my mind, which I later came to know as women's solidarity: if feminists want to uplift care as the central tenet of society, it's only logical that they have to care for one another. When it comes to sexual attractiveness, older women can't hope to compete, so younger ones should be obligated to them in certain respects, which they in turn will then benefit from when they start to get old. Alas, most women don't realize this until they themselves experience a loss of power due to their age, so they can expect nothing but the same treatment from young women as they themselves gave their elders years before. When I shared this thought a few days later with Jan, at the children's playground, he took a swig from his beer and gestured toward his three-year-old daughter Julia. Twenty years from now, he said, maybe she would seduce my future husband. We drank our beers and smoked and laughed about the whole thing. Ever

since then, whenever I see a young woman with a noticeably older man, I picture a young man fucking a kid from the sandbox. For the record: my own consideration for older women in the days of my youth always remained entirely on a theoretical level.

Piotr and I are now enveloped in total darkness, but there's still some light shining somewhere, since I see a sparkle in Piotr's eyes. He isn't looking so much at me as into me. He means what he says deeply and truly. I know it's only for the blink of an eye, and that the depth of an experience has nothing to do with how long it lasts. In the end, after all, what we live for is those fleeting moments of happiness when the self merges with something or someone outside itself, and in moments like that, what will be tomorrow is utterly irrelevant. And I know what will be tomorrow: right after breakfast, David and I will leave on the train to Warsaw.

All I can see is Piotr's eyes, filled with desire, and his young Polish mouth, filled with poetry. Our lips approach and their touch is like a meteorite exploding.

He quickly jerks his head away.

“Przepraszam, ale to jest chyba, jakieś nieporozumienie.”

Piotr stands and looks around in a state of wild panic.