

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.

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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.