Where Eagles Nest

by **Ema Šindelářová**

A search for home becomes a path to inner freedom

When Ema, a Czech émigré living in the Netherlands, decides to buy an abandoned farmstead with her partner Bas in the Spanish mountains of Las Alpujarras, she believes she is embarking on a new, idyllic chapter of her life. But instead of a rose garden, their dramatic departure in the middle of the pandemic's first wave and a strict lockdown leads her into a relentless struggle with damp, broken heating, and an overgrown jungle where a garden should be. She soon realizes, however, that the hardest obstacles are not the demands of the land, but Bas's emotional wall against the world and her own fear of abandonment. What began as the search for a home becomes a journey toward inner freedom.

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Ema Šindelářová was born in South Bohemia in 1966 and grew up in Blatná. She moved to the Netherlands in 1991, where she began working in homeopathy and writing. She publishes in both Dutch and Czech. Her debut novel, *Tranen van een feniks* (2021), appeared in Czech as *Jako tažní ptáci* (2023). Her second book, *Feniks op de finca* (2023), will be published in Czech by Argo under the title *Kde hnízdí orli*. She is also the author of the humorous book *Dvojnožci jsou pitomí: Deník kocoura Mojo* and several collections of short stories. For the past five years, she has lived primarily in the Spanish mountains, where she tends a finca with olive and almond trees.

Kde hnízdí orli May 2026 248 pages sample EN

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Rights Synopsis

In her fifties, Ema, a Czech émigré living in the Netherlands, decides to do what most people never dare: she leaves behind the life she has built, her career as a homeopath, and the place she has called home for decades. Together with her partner Bas, she buys a mountain finca in a remote corner of Spain's Sierra Nevada. At an age when many people seek security and stability, Ema chooses uncertainty. She leaves not only familiar surroundings, but also her adult children, who remain in the Netherlands, and moves farther away from her parents and from the country of her birth, where her roots still lie.

What was meant to be the fulfillment of a shared dream soon becomes a profound test. The old house and its sprawling land demand endless repairs, the mountain landscape proves as unpredictable as it is beautiful, and daily life in a foreign country brings a steady stream of new obstacles. Then the pandemic shuts the world down, leaving the couple isolated for months and forced to rely largely on each other.

In the solitude of the mountains, questions rise to the surface that can no longer be avoided. How strong is a relationship when two people find themselves far from everything familiar and spend every day together? How long can one keep yielding in the name of compromise? And what happens when a woman who has spent much of her life adapting to the needs of others begins, at last, to listen to herself?

The restoration of the abandoned finca becomes a powerful metaphor for Ema's inner transformation. As she works to rebuild the house and revive the land, she begins to reconsider her ideas of home, family, motherhood, and partnership. Her children now have lives of their own, and she learns to accept a new form of motherhood, one in which closeness is not defined by physical distance. At the same time, she carries the pain of her difficult relationship with Bas's children, who have never fully accepted her. After years of trying to find a way toward mutual understanding, she must come to terms with the fact that some relationships cannot be healed by patience or goodwill. This experience, too, becomes part of her search for inner peace.

At the heart of the book is the motif of the nest, a symbol of home, safety, and belonging. Again and again, Ema asks herself where her true nest really is. Is it the country where she was born? The place where she raised her children? Or the landscape she has chosen for this new chapter of her life? As a woman who has put down roots in three different countries, she searches for an answer to the question of whether home is a place, a community of people, or a state of mind.

She finds answers not only in her relationships with others, but also in her growing bond with the natural world around her. Together with Bas, she plants trees, grows vegetables, and gradually turns the neglected land into a living space. She finds refuge in birdwatching and in the rhythms of the mountains. From time to time, above the peaks of the Sierra Nevada, she catches sight of an eagle, a symbol of freedom, courage, and perspective. Its presence quietly runs through the story, offering a counterweight to the doubts and fears she must confront.

Against the backdrop of Andalusia's rugged yet captivating landscape, the author portrays cultural clashes, language barriers, and the everyday absurdities of life in a new country with humor, perspective, and self-deprecating irony. Ema's neighbors also become an important part of the story: their willingness to help often reaches across linguistic and cultural divides. Although their views on farming, time, and problem-solving often differ from her own, they gradually become part of the new world Ema learns to call her own.

Where Eagles Nest is an autobiographically inspired novel about the search for home, the courage to begin again, and a woman who discovers the strength of her own voice in the second half of life. It is a story of motherhood, intimacy, cultural difference, and a deepening relationship with nature. Above all, it is a story about the realization that true home may not be the place we come from, but the place where we are finally able to be ourselves.

Šindelářová – English translation

Introduction

I am lying on the surface of the water, eyes closed, arms spread wide, trying to move my feet at the ankles as little as possible so I do not sink. In the sea, I can float without moving at all, but in the fresh water of our reservoir it is harder.

I love this feeling of weightlessness. The water embraces me; above me, an immense expanse, and all around, quiet. All I can hear is the wind whispering in the crowns of the almond trees and the birdsong. Then the birdsong suddenly stops. Instinctively, I open my eyes and see the silhouette of a large bird of prey against the blue sky. It is circling silently above me, so low that I can make out the distinctive feathering at the tips of its wings and the pale-brown pattern on its belly. An eagle!

I hold my breath and my heart pounds. Not out of fear — I know it is looking for prey much smaller than me — but because I feel an overwhelming sense of awe. Awe of him, the eagle, and of the infinite space above me, of which I am only the tiniest part.

But even as that tiniest part, I belong here. And my possibilities are enormous.

(…)

Walking in the Mountains

Every now and then, it is good to remind ourselves why we wanted to live here, of all places. With all the work on the finca, we do not have much time for walking in the mountains, which we love so much. The highest peaks of the Sierra Nevada cannot be seen directly from our land; you have to walk a little farther out. The GR 7 hiking trail runs near the finca. GR routes — the abbreviation comes from *gran recorrido* — are, as the name suggests, hundreds of kilometres long; some stretch across several European countries.

We have already walked a good stretch of the GR 7, especially on the western side of Las Alpujarras. Ever since we met, we flew to Spain every year to walk in the mountains here. Once we set off together on a high-altitude hike in the Picos de Europa; another time, we walked a section of the GR 11, which runs through the Pyrenees along the border with France. But the Sierra Nevada is our great love among mountains.

The eastern part of Las Alpujarras is completely new to us. We explore the surroundings together, which is exactly what I had hoped for. Not in the footsteps of Bas's ex-partners, but discovering something new together; we have begun a new chapter. Little by little, we are getting to know our new world: paths, peaks, ravines, or barrancos, white villages on the mountainsides. New people, their language and customs, but also plants, trees, animals, and birds.

Sometimes I have to push Bas a little to go on a hike with me, or out for a beer, or to some event. At first Bas rarely feels like going anywhere, but once he gets moving, he is glad I talked him into it.

“You are my High Priestess,” he says. “You show me the way.”

We set out along the GR 7 to the little village of Yegen, which lies two hundred metres higher and only five kilometres away. On the way, we stop to fill up with water from the Cuesta Viñas springs; natural sparkling mineral water flows here straight out of the rocky ground. From there, the route continues steeply upward along a narrow footpath. Here we sometimes meet a shepherd, a pastor, with his herd of goats and sheep, and we stop for a chat. José Manuel used to work as a foreman in a carpentry company, but a herd is easier to manage than people, he says. In his breast pocket he keeps the treasures he has found: a sprig of rosemary and a few stalks of wild green asparagus. Once you learn to recognise them, you can gather your dinner along the way. Bas and I discover that wild asparagus also grows on our finca.

On the way to Yegen, we pass through bushes of lavender, rosemary, sage, and exuberantly flowering cinquefoil. These are exactly the plants we could use on the finca, on slopes where nothing else can grow and where watering is difficult. But for some unknown reason, we still have not managed to get them to take. Several times we have tried digging them up along the way and planting them at home; we have even taken a spade and bags with us on our walks for that purpose, but after a while all the plants dried up anyway. We argue about whose fault it is.

“You damaged the roots because you go at it too aggressively… like you do with everything,” I insist.

“You didn’t plant them deep enough in the ground, I keep telling you!” Bas retorts.

One way or another, neither rosemary nor lavender is growing on our finca yet. We will probably have to ask Pedro about it. Or Juan. Or else we will stubbornly keep trying again and again.

If we set off from our house in the opposite direction along the GR 7, we reach the village of Nechite, which consists of a few houses, a church, and a cemetery. We usually get lost there, because the waymarking suddenly disappears. Perhaps they do it on purpose so that at least the occasional visitor will stray into Nechite. When we eventually find the red-and-white marker again on one of the houses, we continue along a little irrigation channel, an acequia, past old chestnut trees and gardens where tomatoes, red peppers, pumpkins, or melons grow, depending on the season, until we arrive at a deep barranco, where we have to wade across a stream or a rushing river, also depending on the season. The path then winds upward among rocks and steep slopes covered with holm oaks. Here we walk one behind the other along a very narrow track. Even today, you may meet a donkey carrying a load, followed by a “little old man” with a stick, who is most likely about the same age as Bas.

From up above, there is a beautiful view into the valley and of the lower mountain range opposite it; when the sky is clear, you can even glimpse the sea. White surfaces flash in the sun. That is neither snow nor water, but the plastic roofs of greenhouses. For now, they are only patches; let us hope they do not spread over the slopes of Las Alpujarras like some skin disease.

Dozens of lizards, startled by our arrival, scatter in all directions. Dry leaves from fig trees and holm oaks rustle under their little feet as they vanish at the last moment from the enormous feet in hiking boots bearing down on them. The snakes, too, know about us long before we get near. I always hope I will catch sight of a snake; Bas, for his part, hopes I will not. I often think back to my childhood: summer camps, hikes with my parents, who organised those camps, and with the other children. I call them military marches. You could earn points if you knew the name of a plant by the path, the species of lizard or insect that Mum Jana pointed to. Dad František wrote down the names and the number of points. Here in southern Spain, however, there are species unknown to me. I like looking them up online and in books. For birds, I have that handy app, the one that helped me identify the golden orioles. Not yellow parrots after all, but Eurasian golden orioles.

Eagles often fly over the valleys; in Spanish, they are called *águilas*. I discovered that they belong to a rare species, the Spanish imperial eagle. My breath catches whenever I watch them. They usually fly in pairs; only occasionally do you see one alone. They have enormous wings on which they ride the wind, circling slowly and silently above our heads, sometimes quite close.

Long ago, when I was still living in the Netherlands, I was once given a feather from the wing of such an eagle. It came from François, who has lived for at least twenty years now in the neighbouring village. I keep that eagle feather in a shoebox together with other treasures.

The next village on the GR 7 is called Mairena. Several Dutch and English people are said to live here alongside the original inhabitants. The village has one bar, a church, and a derelict sports field. For shopping, you have to go to the neighbouring village, Laroles: another eight kilometres along the GR 7 or by road. On foot, you walk along another barranco, a ravine with a little river winding through it. The path goes up and then down again, as paths do in the mountains. The final climb is uphill once more, to the village of Laroles. It is somewhat larger than the villages already mentioned, which among other things means that you will find three bars there, a church and a cemetery, a shop, and a school. Below the village, a little removed from its “bustle”, lies the finca inhabited by François and Helma. They are happiest hidden among their olive and orange trees, working outside or reading. Their period of integrating with the locals and other immigrants is long over. They like being on their own, and unless it is absolutely necessary, they can do without visitors. That much has long been clear to me. So when Bas and I arrive in this village on foot, with sixteen kilometres of mountain terrain in our legs, we have a beer in the nearest bar and call a taxi to take us back home.

When will we meet again? François and I exchanged emails for years, and even wrote proper letters to each other — something you really do not see very often these days. But I still write them now and then. I like writing slowly, in my own neat handwriting, then slipping the filled sheet into an envelope, sealing it without cutting my tongue, adding the address in my best script, and completing the whole work with a pretty stamp. Do you have anything other than King Willem-Alexander? He is getting boring. And finally, almost ceremonially, dropping it into the postbox. Surely all of that is much more fun than tapping out and sending an email?

Since I have been with Bas, the frequency of my correspondence with François has gradually declined. I spend most of my time with my boyfriend, and François, too, probably prefers conversations with other, no doubt more intelligent people. That, at least, is what I tell myself. As chance would have it, we ended up with a finca near him, and I felt I would be a little less lonely here, less dependent on Bas for absolutely everything. I hoped our contact would be renewed, though probably in a somewhat different form. Perhaps just going for coffee now and then, inviting him and Helma for lunch, a birthday, or something like that. Maybe he thought so too, but then that unfortunate pandemic got in the way. A pandemic of fear and estrangement. According to François, Bas and I are naïve, reckless, and irresponsible. We should not have come here at all just now; perhaps we have brought the new virus with us, here into these unspoiled mountains! We apparently do not understand what a terrible danger Covid represents. François is a doctor, after all; he knows far more about all of this than I do. Definitely no contact with us, at least for the time being. To be on the safe side, they will avoid the whole of Válor. Better not even to leave their finca. They have sufficient food supplies, they grow their own vegetables, and they will buy the rest in the village. They disinfect their hands constantly and hope they have not brought the virus home. No, for now he truly feels no need to meet me. I would probably fling my arms around his neck at once, madwoman that I am! He cannot even contemplate that. We two interlopers have no idea what is happening in the world.

(…)

A Walk Through the Rose Garden

I wake up. Not with a start; I have simply been woken by the light forcing its way in through the window. I edge closer to the man's body lying beside me. It is Bas, I know that for certain; for seven years now, I have been waking up next to him. We are on the finca in southern Spain, the sun has just risen, the birds are singing, and I have no doubts about what my name is, as used to happen in the past. There was a time when I would wake with a start and not know where I was, what my name was, or who was lying beside me. I wrote all of that out of my system in my first book, and I am sure it helped me.

Bas grunts when I nestle up to him; he likes that. With him, this grunt is a sign of contentment. But he goes on sleeping.

When, after a little while, I turn onto my other side, Bas turns as well, so that we are spooning again. I like that very much too, but now I ask myself: is that it? I try to remember when we last made love. So it must be quite a long time ago if I have to think about it this hard. I reach my arm back behind me and touch him. Underpants. He is still wearing those stupid underpants. Every night. I sleep naked. I enjoy the feeling of freedom. When I sleep somewhere other than at home, there is nothing for it and I have to put on some kind of pyjamas or a nightshirt. Nightgowns have a way of turning into lianas in the night, forever tangling me up; pyjama tops creep towards my neck as the night goes on, choking and suffocating me. Pyjama bottoms, on the other hand, slide down towards my ankles — unless they cut into my backside, where they then remain until dawn. Spending the whole night fighting textiles is a horror. Nakedness is much better. Healthier. Let the whole body breathe and give it its freedom.

I will not fall asleep again; besides, it is almost nine already, I can see from the clock on the bedroom wall. I rock my hips a little; perhaps that will wake Bas. Perhaps it will provoke him into making love. Perhaps.

At half past nine, I give up and sit on the edge of the bed. I sigh deeply.

“What is it?” He has woken up.

“Nothing. Good morning. I’m getting up.”

“Hmm…”

I get dressed. I am not in the mood for a shower right now. Actually, I was not last night either. I pull on old leggings printed with koala bears and banana leaves, a stretched-out T-shirt, and I do not bother with a bra. Bras have never fit me properly anyway, and besides, I am convinced that wearing them is unhealthy. My breasts may look better cupped in a bra, but so what? Who cares here? I sigh. Why should I try to look nice? Bas does not notice anyway. He does not even look at me. In a drawer lie beautiful pieces of underwear: lacy little sets in black, red, and white, thongs and a bra by Marlies Dekkers, just lying there, patiently waiting for their chance. I pick up the black bra I have not worn for at least ten years. I sniff it. The mustiness rises from it in a sour wave. Ugh. That is what it gets for lying shut up in a drawer for so long. With both hands, I scoop out the entire contents of the drawer and head towards the laundry basket with them. Then I stop. Should I not be heading for the rubbish bin instead? Will I ever wear any of this again? Oh God.

“Why do you keep sighing? Is something wrong?”

“No. Nothing is happening at all. That’s precisely it.”

“Oh Jesus, here we go again!”

“Yes. I’m angry and irritable… and sad too.”

“All that at once? Wow.”

“Should I throw this beautiful underwear straight into the bin?”

“Why would you do that?”

“Why not? You don’t care anyway.”

“What have I done now?”

“Nothing. You haven’t done anything at all. That’s the point. You don’t do anything. With me. You don’t kiss me, you don’t stroke me, you don’t talk to me, you don’t dance with me, you don’t make love to me. Nothing.”

“Ema, I’ve only just woken up. Was I supposed to have managed all that already?”

“I’m not talking about today. It’s always like this. When did we last make love?”

“I don’t know.”

“You see? I don’t either. It’s been so long that neither of us even remembers.”

“We only just woke up…”

“Well, that’s the only chance, isn’t it, early in the morning. You never want to make love in the evening. Never! Whereas that’s exactly when I would like to, before going to sleep; that’s when it’s nice. But does anyone here care what I like? You certainly don’t. If we do make love sometimes, it’s in the morning, when you have an erection. As if that were the point. Your erection. Pff… We never do it during the day any more either. Always the same thing: morning, in bed, over in ten minutes. Whether I have an orgasm or not. And for your information, I’m not complaining. If that’s the only way it works for you, fine, do it that way! But now nothing is happening at all!”

“No. Does that surprise you? Look at yourself. You’re furious with me first thing in the morning.”

“Because we didn’t have sex again. Again. It piles up terribly, do you understand? And then suddenly the whole pile collapses. That’s what I mean. The whole picture, the way things are between us. You don’t see me at all. Do you actually like looking at me? Are you still attracted to me?”

“Well, look at yourself, the way you are! Those leggings of yours all the time, they aren’t even tight any more. Crocs, an old T-shirt… and worst of all, that pissed-off face of yours. Is that supposed to turn me on?”

I start crying. He has admitted exactly what I was afraid of: he is no longer attracted to me. I sob:

“I thought you didn’t care what I wore. When I dress nicely, you don’t say anything. Never a compliment! Is it so hard to say: you look beautiful, darling?”

“But you know that. When you look good, you know it yourself; I don’t have to tell you as well.”

“How am I supposed to know if you don’t tell me? You don’t react at all. Only when you don’t like something — then yes, then you make yourself heard. When I make an effort, put on make-up, shave everything, smooth beautifully scented body cream all over myself, put on sexy underwear, you do nothing. You don’t even blink.”

“I don’t even remember you doing anything like that. It must have been ages ago.”

“Because there’s no point! Look, my beautiful underwear is lying here in the drawer going musty, waiting for the moths to eat it.”

“Is it wool? No, darling, moths won’t eat your underwear.”

“See? You only call me ‘darling’ sarcastically now. When you think I’m an idiot. With you, ‘darling’ means the same as idiot, moron, stupid cow…”

“Calm down, Ema. I never said anything like that.”

“Like a fool, I try so hard. Sometimes I even pluck up the courage to seduce you, dress nicely, put on heels because I know you like them — though of course here on the finca I can’t go around in stilettos — but when I do put them on, it still has no effect. At most, you look at me and that’s all. You don’t say anything, let alone touch me. I simply don’t know how to seduce you any more. So why should I make the effort for nothing? I might just as well pull on old, stretched-out leggings and put on Crocs. And anyway, have you ever noticed what you look like?”

“Ah, so suddenly this is about me?”

“Do you look after yourself? Do you try to look good? Look at yourself! Always dirty, unkempt, and unshaven. On the rare occasion we go somewhere together, I have to have a long discussion with you, like with a teenager, about suitable clothes. For fuck’s sake, man, who do you think you are? Do you think that could possibly turn me on?”

“Well, apparently not, so why do you keep talking to me about sex if I don’t turn you on?”

“Because I love you, you idiot! That’s why I want to make love with you. That’s the only reason. And because you’re not interested, I’m irritable.”

“I gathered that, yes, I noticed. But it isn’t my problem that you need sex or else you’re irritable. Sort it out yourself.”

“Well, that really is the limit! Now I’m supposed to do it myself as well. That can’t possibly replace making love with your partner! I’m not going to masturbate like a teenager when there’s a man lying beside me!”

“Then go to the bathroom or something.”

I burst into tears again. “I don’t believe this! My own man is sending me to masturbate in the bathroom because he finds me disgusting…”

“I didn’t say that.”

I run out of the bedroom and into the garden, where I walk round and round to calm myself down. Thoughts race through my head: Why? How? Am I really no longer attractive? I am fifty-three, I am the mother of three children, I like a glass of wine — so what? I also do yoga, I walk a lot, and on top of that I do those exercises with resistance bands to firm the body, for God’s sake. So of course my skin is looser; I am not twenty any more. And yes, when I sit down, a roll forms on my stomach. But really only when I sit down — that is normal, surely? Just last year I danced on stage! It was difficult even to get into the company; I had to audition. It may have been an amateur performance, but it was led by a professional choreographer and director, and not just any professionals either: their names often appear in newspapers and reviews. It was an honour for me to work with people like that. I can be proud of myself! I danced on the boards that mean the world, at my age! So how is it that Bas does not find me attractive? I will show that man yet! Not today, or he will think too much of himself. Or worse, that he was right. Absolutely not! I will cut down on wine and food, I will exercise more, especially that roll — it has to go. And I will start taking that supplement again, what is it called… collagen, yes, and I must take hyaluronic acid too. Every day, I will make sure I move somehow. Mountain hikes, for instance; I like those, they are no punishment. I just have to find the time. I simply must. I have to firm up my figure. And I will treat my skin with aloe vera ointment too. At least twice a day, against wrinkles. We have aloe in the garden, so that is fine. I will wash the underwear and start wearing it. Just like that, for the way it makes me feel. I feel attractive in it, more feminine. In general, it will do me good to take better care of myself again. I will do it for myself; to hell with that madman. I am not going to let myself be humiliated like this. “Is that supposed to turn me on?” Did he really say that? As if he himself were some kind of male model!