

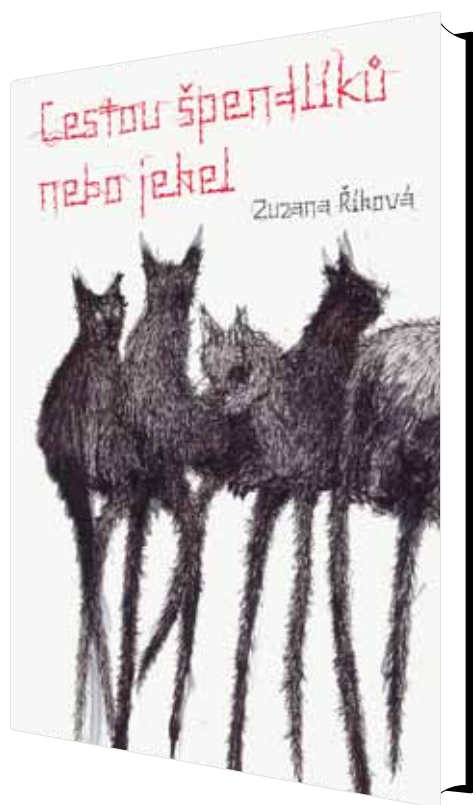


**SHORTLISTED FOR THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS
NATIONAL LITERARY AWARD (2022)**



Playing Wolf

by Zuzana Říhová



September 2021
248 pages

A modern ballad about human destiny and the animal in each of us

Husband and wife Bohumil and Bohumila, together with their son, move from Prague to a remote village with the hopes of salvaging their marriage. In the searing summer heat, they try to fit in with the villagers, only to be met with hostile stares and evasive lies. Each night, the couple hears what they suspect to be a large animal wandering around their cottage – an impression that oddly corresponds to the mysterious flyers found at the local watering hole regarding a wolven fairytale. As inexplicable coincidences begin piling up, it's clear something sinister is afoot.

After a drunken night out, Bohumil and Bohumila come home to find the house empty: their son is gone. After three days of searching, they find the villagers in festive costumes gathered outside their cottage. Is it a bizarre game, or some perverse, folkloric ritual? Are Bohumil and Bohumila in danger? And what has happened to their son?

A dark social tale that slides inexorably towards psychological horror.

"A devilishly creepy work of folk horror... A hair-raising tale of a culture clash."

— *Publishers Weekly*

"A distinctly poetic and disturbingly elegant horror novel for fans of *Midsommar* and *The Witch*."

— *Catapult, US*

Zuzana Říhová (b. 1981) studied Czech Language and Literature and Comparative Literature at the Charles University in Prague. She has been working at the Institute of Czech Literature (Czech Academy of Sciences) since 2007 and was Head of Czech Studies at the University of Oxford from 2014–2017. Říhová, who has a lifelong interest in Czech avant-garde literature, has published a collection of poetry, *I'll Let You in My* (2016), and a novella, *Little Eve* (2018), which was named as one of the Books of the Year in 2018 by a Czech literary web magazine. *Year of Transformation* (2024) explores the life of Franz Kafka in Prague in 1912.



Cestou špendlíků nebo jehel September 2021 248 pages

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Plot summary

Brief plot arc

Bohumil, Bohumila and their intellectually disabled son flee Prague for a cottage in Podlesí after a family crisis involving Bohumila's infidelity, the exhaustion of caring for their child and the collapse of their marriage. But in Podlesí they do not find peace; instead they find a sick house, a hostile village and a ritual community that every year performs a dark version of a "game of wolf". The boy disappears, the parents are drawn into a staged search, Bohumila is repeatedly subjected to male violence, and the entire village is revealed as complicit. The boy apparently survives and ends up with Marcela, but the violent mechanism of Podlesí continues: a passing girl named Vera becomes the next possible victim.

1. The calf's birth in the cowshed

The novel opens in a cowshed, where Bohumil watches Pepa help a cow give birth. Pepa is rough, practical and physical, used to blood, slime and the violence of farm work. Bohumil, a city man dressed unsuitably for the place, is both disgusted and fascinated by the birth, while also ashamed of his own weakness. At one point he has to hold the ropes tied around the calf's hooves, which fills him with revulsion and pity. The calf is born black, with a white mark on its forehead, and for a moment Bohumil reads it almost as a prophetic sign – a new life that might bring change, or some chance that his family will survive in Podlesí.

2. First contact with the village

After the birth, several local men arrive – Sláva, Milan, and also Josef and Michael, two weekenders from Prague. Pepa mocks Josef and Michael with homophobic contempt, while Bohumil feels out of place among both the villagers and the Prague outsiders. We learn that Bohumil has recently moved from Prague to Podlesí with his family, into an old cottage in a ravine. But this was not a free choice; it was an escape after a family catastrophe. Bohumil seems broken, sleep-deprived, his hands shaking, inwardly overflowing with anger, shame and a craving for alcohol.

3. The walk down into the ravine

Bohumil leaves the cowshed and walks home. He passes the neatly kept cottages of the Prague weekenders and despises them in his thoughts, though he knows his contempt is only a defence against his own despair. The landscape of Podlesí frightens him: after dark, he feels as if something living and hostile emerges from the forest – an animal, or perhaps the night itself. His family's cottage lies at the bottom of a ravine, almost outside the world. Bohumil hurries downhill, afraid of the darkness, the forest and the sounds behind the house.

4. Home: Bohumila, the boy and a broken household

At home he is met by his wife, Bohumila. Her right hand is bandaged. She is irritable, exhausted and passive-aggressive. Bohumil takes a shower; in the bathroom he notices the mould, a spider, crumbling tiles, and senses that something else may be living in the house. Afterwards he heats dinner for their son – “the boy”, a twelve-year-old child with intellectual and developmental difficulties. The boy asks about the calf and does not understand Bohumil’s metaphor of a “map” on its forehead, forcing Bohumil to simplify and correct himself. The evening ends with alcohol: Bohumila finds a hidden bottle of Jack Daniel’s and they drink to “us”, though their marriage is plainly in ruins.

5. Bohumila’s perspective: pain, guilt and self-harm

The next scene shifts into Bohumila’s consciousness. She is sitting outside the cottage, tormented by the itching of the wound beneath her bandage. We learn that the cuts are deep, and that she deliberately irritates them – later she pushes a knitting needle into the wound. The boy returns, claiming he has been out in the meadow, but Bohumila knows he is lying. Still, she is happy: perhaps he is freer in Podlesí, perhaps he has secrets, perhaps he is happy for the first time. At the same time, her sense of victimhood grows. She feels she has sacrificed herself for the family and is now being punished for “one weak moment”.

6. Bohumila in the pub

Bohumila goes to the pub U Fandy, where she tries to fit in with the locals and asks Jarda Hejl for work. She sits with Marcela, a local woman whose husband Milan beats her and who escapes into alcohol. Marcela is at times warm, at times embarrassing, but she also warns Bohumila – she sees more than Bohumila realises. Jarda looks at Bohumila in a predatory way and eventually offers her some work helping out at a dance or village event. Bohumila sees this as a chance to belong, but the reader understands that Jarda is drawing her into something dangerous.

7. Sláva and the boy in the forest

We learn that the boy has already been going into the forest, and that Sláva, an older local woodsman, once led him there. He took him to a wooden enclosure hidden among the trees and forced him to climb inside. The boy began to cry, and Sláva watched him with a strange satisfaction: he is not interested in the child as a person, but in his fear. The enclosure appears for the first time as an important place – secret, separate, almost ritualistic.

8. Sláva as hunter and his obsession

A long sequence then focuses on Sláva. He shoots a fox, wounding it in the leg and leaving it to suffer. When he discovers that it has cubs, he returns the next day with his dog Chrástík, finds the den and has the cubs killed. The scene shows Sláva’s cruelty, but also his illness, loneliness and approaching death. Sláva does not see himself merely as a sadist; he sees himself as a hunter, an organiser, someone who

understands weakness, fear and death. He collects versions of Little Red Riding Hood and is fascinated by the motifs of the wolf, the girl, the grandmother, the huntsman, violence and transformation.

9. Flashback to Prague: the crisis with the boy

The novel moves back into the past, to Prague. We see Bohumila with the boy when he was younger: he has fits, repeats words, fails to understand ordinary situations, sometimes meows instead of answering. Bohumila is exhausted and humiliated by the looks of strangers. One day she leaves him alone at home and walks out in despair. While she is gone, the boy creates chaos in the flat – spilled tea, tomatoes, Nutella, overcooked spaghetti. When Bohumil returns, he finds their son in the kitchen, surrounded by a mess that looks almost bloody because of the tomatoes. This scene explains the long-term collapse of the parents: caring for their son has drained them, but they hate themselves for feeling drained.

10. Bohumil alone with the boy

After Bohumila's disappearance in the past, Bohumil has to get the boy ready for nursery school. The scene is both grotesque and desperate: green shirt versus blue shirt, brushing teeth, the buggy in the metro, stairs, crowds, chocolate and a lollipop. Bohumil tries to be kind, but again and again he comes up against his own anger, exhaustion and shame. The scene completes the image of parenthood as constant pressure, in which love is inseparable from resentment.

11. The sick house in the ravine

The narrative returns to Podlesí and describes the cottage as a sick house. It lies at the bottom of a ravine, where the sun never reaches it, surrounded by trees and damp. The locals know that people in this house have "fallen ill, died, or had to start playing". The house is not just a setting; it is an active space that breaks the family down. Bohumil suffers from insomnia and is terrified of the night sounds and the unknown animal behind the cottage. Bohumila tries to grow herbs and vegetables, but everything rots, moulds or withers.

12. The cat named Pig

One morning Bohumil vomits outside the cottage. A hungry cat eats his vomit, and he starts feeding it milk. He names it Pig. The boy is delighted by the cat and asks whether it belongs to them. Bohumila is irritated, because Bohumil's joke about the cat being called Pig will now have to be explained to their son. The scene is strangely tender and repulsive at the same time: for a moment, the family bonds through an animal that feeds on their waste.

13. Little Red Riding Hood

Rewritten and commented versions of Little Red Riding Hood enter the text. The fairy tale is not just an intertext, but a key to the plot: the girl, the wolf, the grandmother, the path through the forest, sexualised and violent danger. Sláva studies, rewrites

and adapts versions of the tale. Gradually it becomes clear that the local “game” is directly connected to these motifs.

14. Bohumila visits Maruška

Bohumila visits Maruška, an old local woman. Maruška tells fragmented stories from her life: dead children, war, a goose, poverty. Her flat is stale, full of old things, photographs and decay. Bohumila feels that Maruška might be the one person to whom she could tell the truth about herself, Bohumil, the boy and their guilt – perhaps because Maruška may not remember it. At the same time, Maruška seems to keep whispering “run” to Bohumila, though this may be a real warning or only Bohumila’s projection.

15. Bohumila at the pond

Bohumila goes to the pond, swims naked and for a moment experiences a strange kind of freedom. Sláva secretly watches her, and his obsession deepens. He sees her body as something he wants to possess, humiliate and “hunt”. The scene by the water is one of the moments when Bohumila seems most alive, but at the same time she becomes even more clearly prey in the eyes of Sláva and the village.

16. The meeting in the pub

Sláva calls a meeting of the locals. On the surface, they discuss bird flu, livestock and resilience, but underneath they are preparing the annual ritual or game. Sláva is ill, exhausted and hungry, but still sees himself as its organiser. The people of Podlesí are not merely passive observers: they are accomplices, waiting for the “game”, for the ritual to be repeated, for the next victim.

17. The dance in the pub

At the dance, Bohumila helps behind the bar. She drinks, smokes, laughs, and the tension in her long-stiff neck releases; for a moment she feels happy. Pepa films her on his phone. Bohumil is also at the event, but their relationship remains strained. Bohumila feels alive and, perhaps for the first time since arriving in Podlesí, imagines that she might leave the next day.

18. Bohumila and Sláva by the pine tree

After the dance, Sláva walks Bohumila back. They go through the darkness towards the ravine and stop by a pine tree. Bohumila is drunk, tired, sentimental about herself, hungry for touch and validation. Sláva kisses her, but the situation quickly turns violent. He pushes her against the tree, is rough with her, and her injured hand begins to bleed again. For Bohumila the encounter becomes a mixture of desire, humiliation, pain and detachment from her own body. Afterwards she returns to the pub as if time has stopped working.

19. Bohumil’s attempted sex and night-time collapse

Later Bohumila goes home with Bohumil. Drunk and desperate, he tries to force sex on her; he is rough, touches her, pushes her towards the cottage. Bohumila sees this as his revenge, his inability to forgive, but also as his absolute despair. Eventually Bohumil breaks down and admits that he is unhappy, lonely, and has no idea what they are doing in Podlesí or what he is doing with his life. Bohumila says she wants to go home. They both fall asleep in a kind of exhaustion.

20. The morning after the dance: the boy is gone

In the morning Bohumila gets up, makes coffee and prepares breakfast. She goes to check on the boy – and his bed is empty. This opens the second part of the novel. At first the parents hope he is somewhere in the house, then in the meadow, then in the village. It is raining. The boy is nowhere. He disappeared during the night or early morning, probably while his parents were sleeping after drinking and after their own emotional collapse.

21. Searching the village

Bohumil and Bohumila go to Sláva's house, then to Marcela's, but no one opens the door. The village is dead after the dance; everyone is sleeping off the previous night. Bohumila begins to think the boy may have gone into the forest. The parents feel that something is wrong, but they cannot yet name it. The "game of wolf" enters the text – a children's game in which the wolf gradually carries off the sheep, the dog and the shepherd.

22. Bohumila at the police station

Bohumila goes to report her son missing. The policeman is bored, bureaucratic, hungry and at first dismissive. He fills out a form, asking about clothes, tattoos, scars, medication and possible reasons for running away. When he learns that the boy has an intellectual disability and left his phone at home, he becomes slightly more attentive. Even so, after a phone call from Podlesí, the report is later shredded. The police are therefore either part of the locals' silent cover-up, or at least knowingly turn a blind eye to the "annual" event.

23. Jarda and Pepa plan the next move

Jarda and Pepa talk in the cowshed about how "Hradec is sorted". They discuss the following day, the weather, filming and the delay. It is clear that the boy's disappearance is not ordinary, but part of the local ritual. The village is already preparing the next stage, in which Bohumil and Bohumila are to be drawn in.

24. Three days after the disappearance

Bohumil and Bohumila are at rock bottom in the cottage. The boy has been gone for three days. Bohumila harms herself in order to feel anything at all. Bohumil wants to go out searching again – in the forest, by the stream, at the lake. Bohumila is terrified of finding their son's body in the water. Still, they finally prepare to go out.

25. The villagers come to “help”

A group of locals arrives at the cottage with torches: Sláva, Pepa, Jarda, Milan, Maruška and others. They claim they have come to help look for the boy. Bohumil is persuaded and feels grateful; Bohumila is frightened and does not want to let them in. Eventually she does. During a hug, Jarda steals the parents' phones. Sláva suggests forming a search line. In reality this is not a search, but a staged operation to lead Bohumil and Bohumila into the forest.

26. The group splits up in the forest

The group sets out into the forest. Sláva suggests they split up. Bohumila is to go with Jarda, while Bohumil goes with Sláva and the others. Bohumila senses the trap and wants to warn Bohumil, but it is too late. Sláva has a rifle and directs the scene like another phase of the “game”. Pepa films everything on his phone.

27. Jarda and Bohumila in the clearing

Jarda leads Bohumila away. He begins to humiliate her verbally and hints at sexual violence. Pepa films for a while, but then tries to stop Jarda, saying that “this isn’t what this is about”. Pepa and Jarda fight. Bohumila initially reacts in a detached, almost absurd way, as if watching a grotesque scene, but then she realises the danger and runs into the forest.

28. Bohumila’s flight and assault

Bohumila runs through the forest, injures her ankle, loses one of her boots and can no longer walk properly. She is afraid that a wolf is chasing her, yet at the same time she wants to see the animal. Eventually Jarda catches up with her and rapes her. The scene is narrated through pain, dissociation, the sounds of the forest and the image of a phone camera that records not the violence but moss, needles, a mushroom and the sky. After the assault, Bohumila gets up, broken and injured, yet paradoxically feels that the old Bohumila has ended and some new version of herself must now come into being.

29. The shot by the enclosure

Bohumila hears a gunshot and moves towards the sound. Meanwhile, by the enclosure, Sláva is directing the next part of the ritual. Bohumil is already there, shaken by the gunshot and paralysed. Sláva humiliates him and hints that Bohumila was “by the tree and in bed” – referring to her encounter with Sláva and questioning Bohumil’s role as husband. Bohumil understands that he has become part of the game, but he is too weak, hungry, frightened and numb to act.

30. Bohumila reaches the enclosure

Bohumila drags herself to the enclosure, sits down beside Bohumil and whispers to him what she had been afraid to say – the truth, relief, guilt, perhaps also the wish to start again. She begs Sláva to give them back the boy. Sláva tells her that “this was

never really about him” – the boy was never the true centre of the game, only a means to an end. When Bohumila keeps begging, Sláva strikes her in the temple with the butt of his rifle.

31. Wolf / dog / ritual

The gate of the enclosure opens. In a half-conscious state, Bohumil sees an enormous wolf come out. Bohumila gradually realises that the animal may in fact be Sláva’s dog, Chrástík – but the boundary between dog, wolf, fairy-tale beast and ritual monster collapses. The villagers film everything. Maruška is present as the “grandmother”. Sláva recites or stages fairy-tale motifs. Bohumila stretches out her hand, as if trying to prevent the meeting of the girl and the wolf. The scene ends with the opening of the enclosure and a descent into a ritual, almost mythic register.

32. After the ritual: new strangers

The ending jumps to a car carrying a new family: a father, a mother and nine-year-old Vera. They are driving through the area, get lost and stop at the pub U Fandy. They appear as new city outsiders, possible new prey. Outside the shop they see Marcela with the boy – so the boy is alive and with Marcela. He smiles at Vera; it is a small, unexpectedly tender moment after all the violence.

33. The pub after the forest

Inside the pub, the locals are sitting, exhausted and chilled after their return from the forest. They eat roast pig, drink and warm themselves. Sláva has not yet appeared, which the others comment on with meaningful smiles. Jarda and the others notice the new family, especially Vera. Without saying it aloud, they understand one another: “this one will do”. The ritual can repeat itself. Sláva may be nearing his end, but Jarda is ready to continue.

34. Final scene: another birth in the cowshed

The novel ends back in the cowshed. Pepa is helping with a difficult birth of twin calves, but both are dead and the cow will probably not survive. Pepa eventually shoots her. He sits beside the dead cow and the two dead bull calves as dawn breaks. He longs for a beer “in the hour between dog and wolf”. The ending closes the circle: the novel began with the birth of a living calf and ends with a stillbirth, the killing of the cow, and a transitional hour between dog and wolf – between the tame and the wild, the human and the animal, day and night.

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.

★

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.