

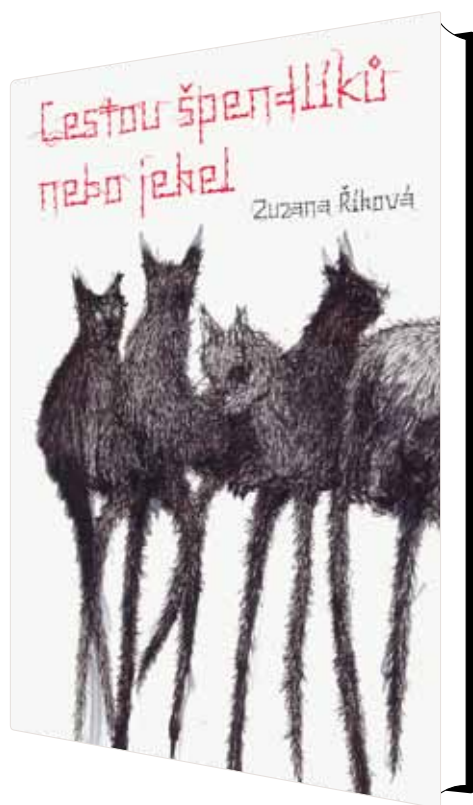


**SHORTLISTED FOR THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS
NATIONAL LITERARY AWARD (2022)**



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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THE INTERNATIONAL PITCH

Playing Wolf

Zuzana Říhová

A marriage on the edge.

A village with its own rules.

A child who disappears.

Bohumil and Bohumila move from Prague to a remote village with their son, hoping to save their marriage. In the suffocating summer heat, neighbours offer evasions instead of welcome. Something prowls around their cottage at night. When their boy vanishes, the village gathers in festive costumes - and the story of Little Red Riding Hood begins to take a terrifying shape.

LITERARY FICTION / PSYCHOLOGICAL FOLK HORROR

A novel of intimate damage and collective cruelty, *Playing Wolf* turns the promise of a rural refuge into a world of surveillance, coercion and fear. The wolf story connects a recognisably contemporary family to an older, darker narrative of hunger and vulnerability.

WHY THIS BOOK TRAVELS

The fear of being watched, the exhaustion of care and the desire to belong give its Czech setting an immediate emotional reach. A poet's intensely physical prose and shifting perspectives expose the threat in both the hostile community and the damaged marriage. Its appeal crosses literary fiction and horror; the US publisher positions it for viewers of *Midsommar* and *The Witch*.

INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATION

Rights sold: USA (Catapult), France (Éditions du Seuil), Poland (Afera), Serbia (Blum). The US edition, translated by Alex Zucker, appeared in September 2025; the paperback followed in September 2026. [View the US edition.](#)

American critical response

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

Publishers Weekly
26 June 2025 · [Read the full review](#)

“Eloquent and psychologically intense ... fantastic psychological horror that exceeded my expectations tenfold.”

Sammy Loree, Bookstr
18 July 2025 · [Read the full review](#)

“An at times elusive yet consistently dread-inducing fairytale.”

Betty Fall, The Coachella Review
30 September 2025 · [Read the full review](#)

“Folklore and horror mingle in this deliciously grim debut.”

Mariko Hower, Washington Independent Review of Books
26 November 2025 · [Read the full review](#)

Quotations are excerpted from the original English-language reviews. Ellipses indicate omitted text.

READING MATERIAL

An extended synopsis follows, including the final ritual and the ending’s unresolved questions. The English reading sample is taken from the Catapult edition, translated by Alex Zucker.

A family looking for a new beginning

Bohumil and Bohumila leave Prague with their son and move to Podlesí, a small village in the Czech borderlands. Their marriage is in crisis, and the move is meant to give them a chance to begin again. Their son has a developmental disability; years of worry, diagnoses and attempts to find help have strained the family. The hope that a different setting will repair their lives meets a place that seems determined to expose everything they would rather conceal.

The family lives in a cottage at the bottom of a ravine, apart from the village's more comfortable houses. Summer is oppressively hot, but the woods around the cottage become cold and threatening after dark. Bohumil cannot sleep. He hears unfamiliar cries and movements outside, sounds he tries to identify as ordinary animals without ever convincing himself. He drinks to quiet his anxiety and gain a few hours of rest.

Bohumila is equally isolated. Her wounded, bandaged hand demands constant attention, and she struggles with an urge to scratch beneath the dressings. Caring for her son, keeping the house and managing the long hours leave her desperate for something to do beyond the cottage. She wants work, companionship and a place in the village. Her efforts to reach out instead make her painfully aware of being watched.

The couple's shared first names suggest closeness, but their private thoughts expose how far they have moved apart. They cannot reliably offer one another comfort. Each carries anger, shame and an account of the marriage's failure that the other cannot settle. The same isolation that draws them to the countryside also makes it harder to resist the unease gathering around their new home.

The novel begins by placing this distress inside ordinary encounters. A drink in the pub, an invitation to see farm work and a conversation with a neighbour become situations in which the newcomers cannot read the rules. They first explain awkwardness as their own lack of experience with rural life. Gradually, that charitable explanation becomes harder to maintain. Small lies, unexplained coincidences and hostile looks accumulate, and the hoped-for refuge begins to feel like a trap.

The village decides who belongs

At U Fandy, the local pub, Bohumila hopes to find company and perhaps a job. The room is thick with heat, beer and cigarette smoke. Its men watch her, but their attention does not offer recognition or welcome. She imagines how a moment of weakness would be carried through the village, embellished into an entertaining story. Even her embarrassment feels like something the community might claim for itself.

She sits with Marcela, a woman whose talk and drinking conceal the violence she endures at home. Bohumila recognises the loneliness behind Marcela's cheerful assurances about her husband. Yet recognition does not create a dependable alliance. Everyone knows intimate facts about everyone else: who drinks, who is ill, which husband is violent. Knowledge circulates freely while the suffering behind it remains something people do not openly confront.

Bohumil tries a different route into village life. At the cowshed he witnesses a difficult calving. The physical force of the birth unsettles him, while the farmers' brisk handling of the cow and calf makes his own unease conspicuous. He briefly imagines the newborn as a sign that change might still be possible for his family. That fragile hope is overtaken by shame and the fear of being judged.

His conversations with local residents are no easier. He hears politeness as performance and suspects that friendliness will turn into gossip as soon as he has gone. His contempt for the village mixes with a desperate wish to be accepted. The narration exposes this contradiction rather than granting him an untroubled outsider's perspective: he is vulnerable to cruelty, but also capable of it.

The narrative moves into other minds as well, revealing predatory intentions beneath ordinary manners. The gamekeeper Sláva takes the boy on a fox hunt and imagines Bohumila within a version of Little Red Riding Hood, with himself in the wolf's role. Meanwhile, the couple find strange leaflets about the wolf tale at the pub. The story in those leaflets begins to echo the movements they hear around their cottage at night.

Podlesí's closed world assigns the family a role before they understand that there is a game. Their difference is treated as something to observe, discuss and exploit. By shifting between the newcomers and the people watching them, the novel lets the reader sense danger without providing a single trustworthy explanation of what is happening.

When the boy disappears

The accumulating unease becomes an immediate crisis after a drunken night out. Bohumil and Bohumila return to their cottage and find it empty. Their son is missing. A family that came to Podlesí hoping to recover its sense of safety now has to search for its most vulnerable member in a place where neither parent knows whom to trust.

The disappearance exposes the fragility of their relationship. Fear for the boy does not erase the anger and exhaustion that already divide them. Instead, the search forces them to confront the thoughts they would least like to admit: resentment at the demands of care, the desire for an easier life and the possibility that a parent might briefly wish to be free of a child they also love. Their guilt makes the threat within the family as troubling as the threat outside it.

The boy is left unnamed in the narrative, a choice that heightens the contrast between the adults' densely articulated frustrations and his vulnerable position among them. His disappearance concentrates the novel's wider questions about dependence and belonging. Who is protected by a household or a community, and who can become inconvenient enough to be pushed outside its circle of concern?

The couple's attempts to find him do not restore a familiar logic of reassurance and rescue. The village has its own ways of withholding and supplying information. When its residents appear ready to help, the parents have to weigh that apparent sympathy against the evasions and intimidation they have already experienced. A gentle gesture may conceal danger as effectively as a hostile one advertises it.

The earlier wolf story now becomes harder to dismiss as a curiosity. The creature outside, the leaflet at the pub and the villagers' behaviour seem to belong to the same pattern, but the couple cannot tell how literally to read it. Their desire to escape Podlesí runs up against the urgent need to recover their son. They are drawn deeper into a world in which the terms of the search are being set by other people.

The pressure lasts for three days. By the third day after the disappearance, the private emergency is becoming something collective: the villagers gather outside the cottage in festive clothing. Their appearance transforms the parents' fear into a spectacle whose meaning remains uncertain.

The wolf tale becomes a ritual

The gathering leads Bohumil and Bohumila into a forest ritual shaped by Little Red Riding Hood. The couple are no longer merely newcomers encountering a local custom. They have become participants in a performance they did not choose, while the fate of their son gives them little freedom to refuse. What looked like village gossip and disjointed acts of hostility begins to take the form of a shared design.

The wolf tale supplies roles through which ordinary people can become pursuers, victims and spectators. It brings together the hunting imagery, animal sounds and bodily unease that have been present since the family's arrival. The forest is both a physical place beyond the cottage and the setting of a story that the village seems determined to impose on the strangers.

The villagers perform the ritual in the hope that it will release them from despair and emptiness. Their own damaged lives matter to the novel's account of cruelty: boredom, loneliness and frustration are part of the atmosphere in which the game takes hold. Yet that need for relief is made to depend on others. The family's vulnerability becomes the material of a communal attempt to feel something and to act together.

As the ritual intensifies, the boundary between theatre and reality becomes unstable. We cannot be certain whether the parents are witnessing a grotesque game, a dangerous form of modern folklore or a threat to their lives and their son's. The ending preserves that uncertainty. The wolf cannot be reduced to a creature whose identity would explain away everything that has happened, and the adults' private conflicts cannot be separated from the violence of the group.

This is the culmination of a narrative in which suffering has repeatedly been turned into spectacle. A birth, a woman's wounded hand, a neighbour's unhappy marriage and the newcomer who might cry in the pub are all exposed to the gaze of others. The forest ritual draws those habits of looking and judging into a collective action. It makes the question of who is playing, and who is being played with, inseparable from the fear for the missing child.

Říhová's shifting perspectives and intensely physical imagery keep the reader inside conflicting accounts of the same world. The story moves from contemporary family distress towards the logic of a ballad or a fairy tale, without giving up its recognisable social setting. Its final force lies in the convergence of marital failure, the community's hunger for a scapegoat and the familiar story of a wolf that can approach wearing a reassuring face.

English reading sample

Playing Wolf
Zuzana Říhová

TRANSLATION

Translated from Czech by Alex Zucker

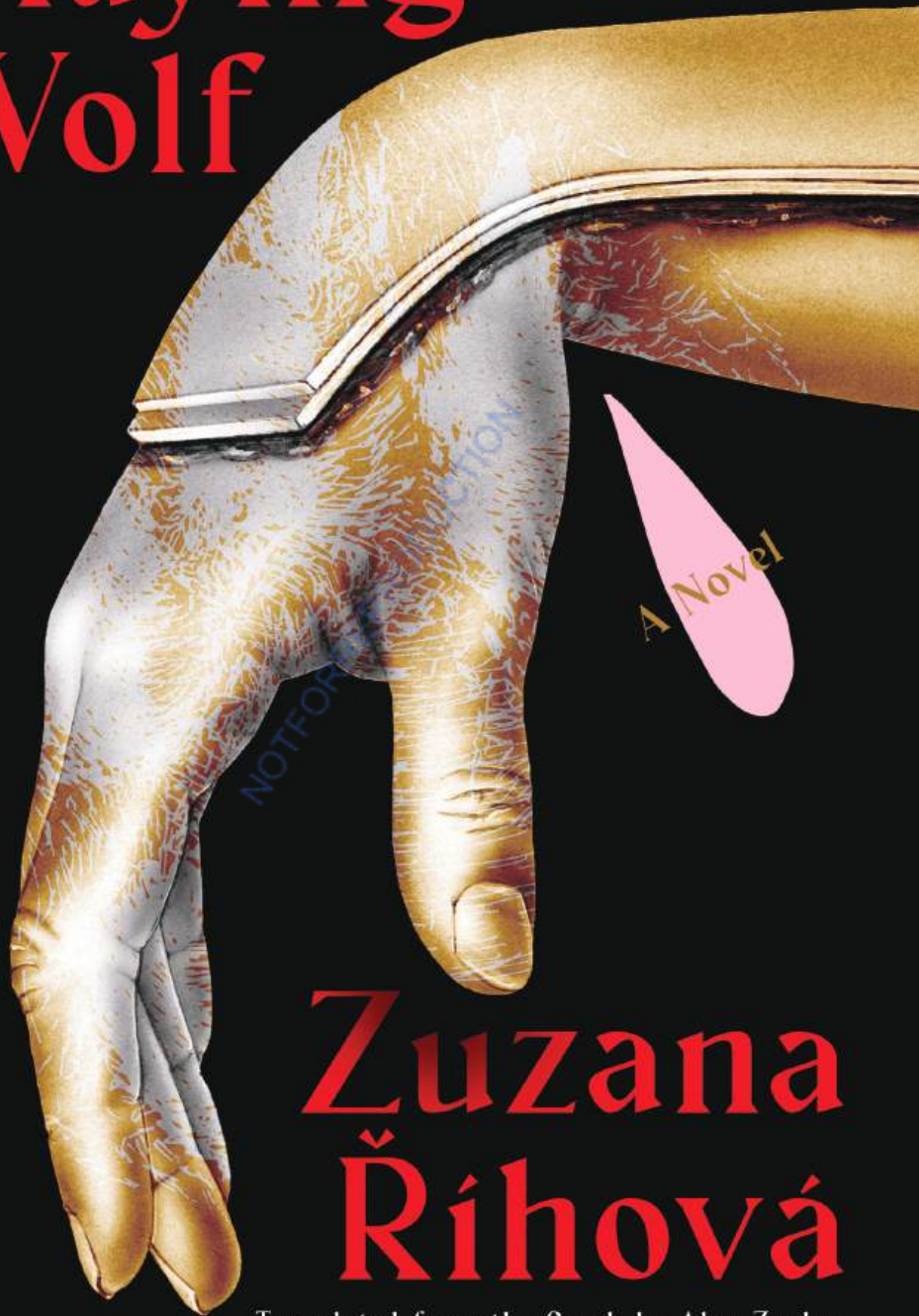
Forty pages from the opening of the published English edition (book pages 3-42). The sample also includes the cover and prefatory pages.

PUBLISHED US EDITION

Catapult, 2025

Translated from Czech by Alex Zucker

Playing Wolf



A Novel

Zuzana
Říhová

Translated from the Czech by Alex Zucker

Playing Wolf

A Novel

Zuzana Říhová

Translated from the Czech by
Alex Zucker

Playing Wolf

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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First Catapult edition: 2025

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the night is bitter
I know why
it's when the wolf
rubs himself against the stone

—TRISTAN TZARA

Part One

He stood shuffling her feet in the manure. Her enormous belly, riddled with pulsating veins, tensed and relaxed in spasms. A sharp-edged hoof peeked from underneath her tail, with a thin dribble of mucus running off the edge. The gray-white trickle stretched unbroken, quivering in the summer breeze, then plopped into the litter.

He swallowed dryly, furrowed his brow in disgust. Watching as Pepa prepared everything at the rear end of the cow. A large metal bucket of lukewarm water, a small cup, some old towels. Pepa pulled on his long rubber gloves, can't call him a pig. Šimečka from Dolní Planá pulls calves without gloves all the time, sticking his arm in up to his elbow like it's no big deal. But that's just nasty.

He started working his arm into the cow, fishing around to the left a bit, then back to the right. The cow shuddered, her belly contracted sharply twice, and the whole hoof emerged. Pepa deftly withdrew his arm and expertly slipped the hoof into the loop of hemp rope he had ready and waiting. Pulled tight. The cow mooed

uneasily. She didn't have a clue what was happening at her behind. Her head was trapped in the bars of the metal fence, a space just barely big enough for feeding.

"Whoa, old girl, now hold on there." Pepa delivered a cheerful slap to her behind and glanced over at Bohumil, who faintly smiled back. Why do they always have to call them old girl, he says to himself.

He watched as the hoof slowly inched its way out of the cow. He did his best to look perfectly normal, nonchalantly indifferent, but he badly wanted to get the hell out, run home and pour himself a drink. Then maybe watch a video of a calving on YouTube, in case he wanted to see a birth, which he did not. The scene in front of him was covered in blood and slime, he felt grimy even though he was standing several meters away on a concrete-paved walkway. Still, he took a step or two back, he might get splattered and he'd bought this jacket only a couple of weeks ago.

Pepa ruffled his feathers. I'll show that snoot how things work around here. Harsh village, harsh people. He snorted. City slicker, in his beige jacket and beige loafers, walkin in here like he's steppin out on the town. Starin at that calf like he's never seen veal in his life. No doubt a vegetarian. No doubt a moron. A step closer and he would have caught the delicate scent of perfume. But he stood at the cow's rear end, tugging out the calf. The cow lashed out with her right hind leg and Pepa replied with a proper kick. Glanced over at Bohouš. Guy introduced himself as Bohumil, but only a lamebrain'd call himself that. I mean, my name's Josef, but you'd never catch me sayin that. Pepa scratched at his crotch. He was getting hot.

"I'm sweatin my balls off." Peered at the newcomer

again. Ha, look at him all horrified, no pussyfootin around your precious little feelings here. He gave the cow another kick, she flinched in pain.

“Now whoa, whoooo there, old girl, you know the drill.”

Pepa worked his hand back up the rope till he was deep in the vagina. Rotated his arm, groping around the dense darkness of the vulva. He enjoyed calving.

Bohumil couldn't tear his eyes away. He gaped in disbelief as Pepa's arm disappeared first up to the wrist, then up to the elbow. Good lord, how far in is he going to stick it? His stomach pitched. His mouth was agape in astonishment, but he had no idea. Oh my God, look at him fishing around in there, rooting around like that! A thin stream of blood flowed down past Pepa's elbow. He's got it, aah, there she is. He wound the rope around the second hoof, smiled imperceptibly, that oughta do it. He tugged but nothing happened. He tugged again, red-faced with effort. He dug in his heels, pulled as hard as he could, let a fart, definitely let a fart, but the calf wouldn't come out.

“Hey, young one, c'mere and hold this for me, I gotta fetch some tools,” said Pepa, holding out the rope. Bohumil peered around the empty cowshed. Oh no, he's talking to me. Uh-oh.

He stepped forward and unthinkingly took hold of the straps. He chastely averted his gaze, looking down at the round balls of cow dung in the hay. He was embarrassed by the spread-eagled vagina, the sharp hooves jutting out of it. A trickle of sweat ran down his back. Flies buzzed loudly around his face, one flew in his ear. But he didn't take a swing at them, didn't want to startle the cow. He was afraid of her. She was enormous. He stood at her rear end, examining the amniotic fluid-spattered hay, the whitish goo on his right shoe, letting the flies gnaw at him.

This is exactly what I deserve, he thinks. Standing in a cowshed, shoes splattered with vaginal slime, holding a calf on a leash. If only I didn't feel like crying all the time.

He raised his eyes to the level of the limply protruding hooves. He felt so sorry for the cow, for a moment even more sorry for her than for himself.

Pepa returned carrying a huge metal instrument.

"Shit, you're gonna rip that calf right out for me, aren't cha?" He nudged Bohumil in the ribs. "Hand me that, would you?" He began mounting the structure onto the cow's rear end.

Bohumil swallowed. If he sticks that in there, I'm going to puke.

He handed over the gnarly leash and stepped back onto the concrete walkway. In a single motion Pepa fitted the cow's rear into the metal frame and attached the ropes encircling the hooves to the lever. He started to pump and the calf slowly came sliding out. The whole thing seemed to take forever. Pepa, face flushed, shook the hooves back and forth, apparently the calf was stuck. He pumped away like a madman, yanked a couple more times, and a head emerged into the light amid a huge wave of slime, eyes wide with astonishment. Bohumil stared in fascination. The animal's eyes had a knowing look. As if it had a prophecy to bring to the world. He knew that was the kind of change he needed, the kind of change he'd been waiting and watching for, dammit, change like that is the reason I came here, isn't it? The calf's head was entirely black, except for a small white patch on its forehead, actually no, he wrinkled his nose, more like a star, it kind of looked like the sacred calf, he had to grin at that. He couldn't wait to see what the calf would preach. What

odds would it give him and his family, he wondered. He himself put them at pretty low.

The calf still couldn't perceive anything. It was practically blind and only halfway out, forelegs dangling like an old lady's ponytail. Pepa gave one more tug. It plopped out softly onto the hay, so quiet Bohumil was afraid. Is this normal? It seemed to be alive, chomping its teeth. No screaming or moaning. Bohumil nodded like it was what he had expected. The gift of silence, heaven-sent. Stillness and silence. I am alone, I am evil, and my wish is that no one ever be happy again. He went on talking quietly to himself, watching them bring the calf to life, rubbing it with hay, poking it in the chest, massaging its heart. He wished someone would do the opposite to him. Deliver him from life. Deliver him from this evil person, enveloped in the silence of his loved ones, who didn't love him.

"Are you meditating or what, shit. That's it, show's over." Pepa splashed him with some of the water he'd used to rinse off the calf. That'd put him on his feet. Bohumil thought he was pushing both the cow and the calf a little too much. Why not leave it alone for a second? Give it a moment or two to breathe. They had left the boy with them for nearly half an hour before they took him away to wash off the blood and goo.

The cow strained toward the calf, but the metal bars kept her from moving. She could sense the new life, still wet and fragile. Unable to turn and look, she shuffled her feet, lowing in exhaustion. Finally some sound, he was starting to feel like he was acting in a silent film: jerky movements, pratfalls and pranks, with a heavy, faded blanket of sadness over everything. Pepa cleaned off the calf and gave it a shake. Not so rough, Bohumil felt like repeating, but they only would have mocked him. They were almost all here now, the village big men. Sláva, the game warden,

lived by the field. He was almost two meters tall, thick gray hair, talked slow and not much. Milan had probably come straight from the pub. He commuted to work on the assembly line in Hradec. Had a chipped right incisor and a soft, slight lisp. Seemed like a nice guy. Those two over there, sauntering toward the cowshed, Bohumil hadn't met yet.

Pepa, registering his glance toward the road, stopped rubbing the calf with straw and turned to look.

"The pansies." He grinned. "Buddies from Prague. Best buddies, if you get my drift." He gave Bohumil a meaningful wink.

Bohumil's knees began shaking again. Ever since he had moved here, he hadn't had a good night's sleep. Sure, everyone in the city complains about cars and night trams. But a rooster? It was one thing not being able to sleep because of how fucked-up his life had become over the past few weeks. But sleeping here was impossible, especially after 5:00 a.m. He wasn't sure where exactly the crowing was coming from. But he was going to wait for the fucker and slash his neck. He wanted to so badly. He wanted so badly to cut its throat. He felt like the time was ripe for violence, he couldn't go on suppressing the rage. Yet even just the thought of a knife made him queasy. Then he had to think of trains. That helped. Almost every time. *Diddum diddum, diddum diddum.*

The pair of men reached the cowshed. One bent down to get a closer look at the calf. "Oh my gosh, it's gorgeous, so soft and fluffy."

Pepa lowered his eyes, kicking gently at the metal gate.

"Jesus, I'm sorry, I didn't even introduce myself. Seriously, that calf there is divine." He stood up and shook Bohumil's hand.

"Josef Broumský."

Pepa, observing the introductions, began to kick the

gate faster, then turned his eyes the other way and slightly twitched his head. Josef, Josef, oh boy. He kicked the gate one more time, so hard it rattled.

“Bohumil Novotný.”

The other man shook Bohumil’s hand. “Michael Horna. Pleased to meet you.”

Pepa stared into the ground. Right, Michael, obviously.

“We heard about you. How long have you been here?” asked Josef, still turned partway toward the calf.

“Two weeks now, two.” But it had already been four. Four weeks in Podlesí, an entire month at the peak of summer heat in this shithole.

“Just a hot minute. So this is all still brand-new to you, huh?”

Bohumil nodded indistinctly.

“Are you all here permanently, or is this like just a breather from the city, for the summer?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Permanently, for now.”

Pepa smirked, poking the calf with his foot. “Where else’ll you find fresh veal like this?”

At the farmers’ market on Náměstí Míru, Bohumil felt like saying, but he kept it to himself. He felt like this was his new profession. Standing around the cowshed, or the summer pen outside the cowshed, nodding, staring, and never saying another word again. Submitting to silence, lying down in it like a bed of sea-foam. Saltwater filling his mouth. Sinking deeper and deeper into the quiet and metallic dark, kilometers and kilometers down to the bottom, where creatures that no one has ever set eyes on dwell. Until him, Bohumil Novotný. But no one else. Quietly watching. Peering into their oval mouths. Waiting to see whether there will be love in Podlesí, or not-love. Nothing in between.

He agreed to Pepa’s suggestion of meeting up in the

pub. We'll get hammered, he said. A few beers washed down with some shots of zelená, figured Bohumil. Did people here still drink that stuff? He looked around. Yep. Definitely, and with milk. Once again, that need to be mean. To tell them he knew they would all end up puking from it in the morning, then hop into their coveralls without a shower and hop over to Bubble's place for a couple of pick-me-ups and a plate of potato salad with sausage. I need to calm down, he thought. Smile. No, that's too much. There, that's better. Just slightly raise the corners. I don't need to look like a little twit.

I'm going to live in Podlesí. Not because I want to, but because I have to.

"So, you up for a drink?" Pepa asked again.

Bohumil watched as they carried the calf into the hutch. No, pen, a hutch is for rabbits. Still, somehow that didn't sound right. All that commie farm coop terminology must have been invented by a maniac, Bohumil thought, a nice warm place for every animal.

"Sorry, afraid not."

"Us either, we've got a rabbit in the oven," said Michael, even though no one had asked him.

For the first time Bohumil smiled like he meant it. He imagined one of those puny little stuffed white bunnies, the kind parents buy for their kids when they bring home a perfect report card, wiggling its little pink snout around the corner of the oven. Then, picking up on the men's astonished looks, he quickly retracted his sneer into an acceptably neutral smile. One of his canines got caught on a bit of his lower lip, his lips swerving left as his eyes continued to smile. He looked insane.

"But seriously, thanks a lot for today, it was great." He had no idea what the best way was to acknowledge a successful birth.

“My pleasure,” said Pepa. “Stop by tomorrow, I might hear of something. In summer, though, it’s all stuff in the field, or farmwork of course.”

“Thanks. I’ll stop by,” said Bohumil. “And thanks.” He thanked him again because he needed to be thankful.

He walked down the road from the cowshed together with Josef and Michael. But he badly wanted to be alone. Go off and sob in the bushes somewhere, or he was going to suffocate.

“How long have you all had your cottage here?” he asked, steering the focus away from himself. Everyone wants to talk about themselves after all, it’s the number one topic.

“This is our second summer now. It’s great here, seriously beautiful. Especially on bikes. Little by little we’ve been out here more and more, sometimes we don’t even go into Prague anymore.”

Was he imagining things? Was that a sigh?

“So you, like, seriously live here? You’re from Prague too, right?” Michael asked, and immediately Josef sadly repeated: “It’s beautiful here.”

Like actors. Like in an ad. Seriously beautiful, seriously, and cheap, and the second pack is free.

Just give it a rest now, stop.

“Yeah, I’m from Prague. Holešovice. Yeah, I’m living here, I live here now. In Podlesí.” He hoped by repeating it he could convince himself. His voice wavered with the anxiety of a middle-aged man who’s had to choose something he didn’t want and can’t stand, crushing his eyes into their sockets, carving him up into slices, until soon there will be nothing left of him. Like Bubble shaving salami in the slicer at the convenience store, one piece

flopping onto the next, till the last bit, the hard butt end with the string hanging out, is all that's left. No one is going to put that on a piece of bread anyway, so usually Bubble just scarfs it down right on the spot, when no one is watching. What does he do when no one's watching and his eyes are fogged over white? He is ashamed. He squats down on the ground and cries. What else can he do? Nothing, there's nothing else to do but cry.

"I live over there." He raised an arm heavy with insomnia. His fingers trembled violently. Michael gave Josef a meaningful look. Bohumil awkwardly lowered his arm to his side. Now, boys, you can talk this all out at home, strange guy, probably drinks if his hands shake that bad, you'll probably chalk it up to debt, what else would make a Prager move to an old cottage in the borderlands. But the moment you get a look at how beat-up my wife is and see the scars on her hands, you'll start greeting me with respect, though granted, from a distance, and when I take a swing at a horsefly, those ones that come flyin up here from the pond and bite you on the thigh, you'll flinch a little bit. You might feel stupid afterward, but you'll shrink back, out of the way, and hide your head in your shoulders. Like I said, you can talk this all out at home, over a drink. My eyes won't be turning white today, they'll be bloodshot from your wine. Now, come on, boys, seriously, wait till home, I can't stand those meaningful looks.

"Oh yeah, we know, over there," said Michael, nodding toward the ravine where Bohumil's cottage was. "Seriously cute. Bit of a fixer-upper, right? Still, like we said, the countryside around here is seriously beautiful."

Fuck your countryside.

"Beautiful." He nodded.

Never did he curse, ever, couldn't stand it. But curse

words were all that occurred to him now, like he needed to try them all out at once. Shout something really rude. Refresh himself with obscenity, smear his gums with the nastiness bubbling up from inside him. Sláva is a lizard-fucker!

It was evil, truly evil. I gotta get out of here or I'm going to scream.

"Hey, we're taking off, but we'll definitely see you again, yeh?"

"Yeh, absolutely yeh."

"You should totally stop in if you're passing by. Just bang on the gate, whichever one. We're usually home for dinner." Michael nodded.

"And we brew some seriously good coffee," Josef added.

"Totally. Thanks." I could use a shot right now. He turned sharply downhill along the forest path. I'm having a shot. No ifs, ands, or buts. He walked past the Praguers' log cabins. Lawn meticulously mowed, smoothed, vacuumed. Flower garden neatly mulched. Just like inside their heads. Water daily, trim the hedge, park the lounge chairs away for the night inside the shed. Occasional trips to Baumax and OBI and the flower shows. And Makro, shop in bulk. Currant bush in the corner, dotted red every summer like a little kid's hiney. Covered with earwigs and wasps, but you can't just get rid of it. And the cook-outs! Nothing but the best smoked meats, oh, and the fish! And a pool, if they can save. The final seal of approval. It's a beautiful garden. Our garden, a thing of beauty. So, what do you think? You like? Isn't it beautiful?

He stopped and took a deep breath. His head was churning and hissing like a bottle of spoiled burčák. I'll never survive here with this attitude, I know that much. Today I'll pour myself a drink and crawl off to lick my wounds, but tomorrow I need to start doing something

about it. So I can like it here. Nature, peace and quiet, clean air and friendly people. Yeah, friendly people, right, did you see those guys? He practically laughed out loud. This isn't going to work. We let it all run through our fingers, and you, my dear, let it run right between your legs.

He left behind the cluster of cottages and the last level surface still drivable in a car. Dusk was falling. He had witnessed it now several times. The sun transformed into a blood orange. And then it was dark. A dense, liquid dark. Even now, in summer, an icy breath drifted toward the cottages from the woods. Sitting in front of the house it was still warm, but as soon as you walked a bit farther, you could feel the chill on your chest and it got harder to breathe. Even now. He could feel his heart cooling down, feel the beating slow. Like the way he imagined death must feel. The dark, cold forest beyond the cottage frightened him. In the daytime it was totally quiet. Maybe a few mushroom hunters. But as soon as it began to get dark, the forest filled with snaps and pops, pine needles squealing under the hooves of God knows what. A strange whinnying and braying woke him at night. Stags barked, supposedly, but no way was this a stag. It sounded like a mouflon, but he would have been laughed out of town if he'd claimed there were mouflons howling outside the cottage. Not howl, dammit, what noise did they make? He never would have thought he'd be at a loss for words here. Here of all places, where the average village inhabitant had a vocabulary of two thousand words, give or take. Passive. He slowed his pace. It can't go on like this, good lord. Here he was again, moaning and groaning, grumbling, griping. Maybe the people here were great. Yeah right, have you ever spoken to them? A shot, I need a shot.

He dipped sharply downhill, the last cottage on the ridge was now far behind as he barreled down into the

heart of the ravine. As the blood orange faded, he instinctively stepped up his pace. It probably wasn't a mouflon, but there was something alive in those woods. And it didn't sound friendly. He'd noticed that no one set foot outside the pub or the cottages after dusk. And why bother, when the bewitching eye of the TV was there to keep them occupied? But maybe they were afraid. He could sense the fear in them. He could sense something in the people of Podlesí. He shivered with cold. But enough already. I'll never survive here like this. And the whole reason I'm here is so I can survive. We came so we could survive. He was walking so fast he was out of breath. But the cottage was all the way at the bottom of the ravine. The cottage was the ravine. The place where no one could live anymore. That was where Bohumil and Bohumila lived. Them and the boy.

He tripped, unable to see the toes of his shoes. Uh-oh. He looked skyward with concern as the darkness hungrily swallowed the orange, sucking it up in its velvety maw. The sweet juice came squirting down onto his shoulders. Sticky. He sped up his pace. Something dark enfolded him in its embrace, night sneezed in his face. Uh-oh.

Forgive me, young man. I'm just stretching myself out here, sprawling this way and unfurling that way and breathing a chill of fear and anxiety into you. Young man! You must find that flattering, no? Wrinkles forking from your hands to your back, forehead crinkled. Hairline shiny with sweat. Our hair's not getting any thicker now, is it, oh no, not one bit. Breasts sagging like dog ears. But maybe the best is yet to come, what do I know? So don't worry. No one ever died of anxiety. It chokes the arteries, oh yes, clogs the heart, but no one has darkness, anxiety, loneliness written down on that last final form, let alone

night. Because the anxiety I blow over the farms and cottages after dark is soft and tender as silk. I realize when you add in to that the growling and barking coming out of the woods and up onto your doorstep it doesn't add joy to anyone's day, but one mustn't take everything so seriously, my little shaveling. Come, sit with me awhile, have a seat for a spell, we'll just poke a few little fingers in and be on our way again. And where will we poke them? Well, right where it hurts and bleeds, not where it tickles, oh no. You can save all that for morning, all that tickling and running your nose along the ribs to make the children laugh. I'm about to delve into your suffering. Hungrily taking those trembling fingers of yours into my mouth, feeding on your fear, sipping it from your tight-clenched lips. Give me a drink, you scoundrel, you belong to me now, I'll hold you so close you'll be gasping for breath, all the better for me to drink in your perpetual but sweet regret.

Night gives him a poke in the ribs, but he can't go any faster. He's already running as is! Dashing home through the abyss. Home? Finally catching sight of the doorstep, he stretches his arms out in front of him, for the sprinkle of light from the cracked lamp to protect him from the badgering night. As the glow above the gate enfolds him in its sweet embrace, night retracts its bony claws and spits, You know what awaits you here and it will be almost like death, that's right, a dark, forest death.

Bohumil burst in the door, sweat-soaked shirt glued to his back.

"What is the matter with you?" She walked past, kicking a basket of laundry in front of her. Her hand was still in pain.

"Nothing." He didn't turn to look back at the woods,

trying to calm his breathing. "A calf was born," he said confusingly.

"Well, that's good to know." She nudged the laundry out in front of the drying rack, tripping over something along the way. She cursed and began to hang the clothes.

"Want help?"

"Better heat up his supper, he's ready for bed."

"Okay, let me just quick take a shower, all right?"

"I approve."

He drew his shoulders together. She had a knack for that. Telling him he smelled. But without actually telling him. She was good.

He locked himself in the bathroom, slipped out of his T-shirt and pants. He was so skinny. When was the last time he ate a proper meal? He sat down on the edge of the tub and studied his hairy insteps. My little hobbit, she used to tease him. Were they ever going to kid around again? He tapped a loose piece of tile with his thumb. The grout around the edge of the tub had crumbled off, leaving gaps big enough for a hornets' nest. Probably not. They were probably never going to kid around again. He climbed into the tub before turning on the water. A spider sat perched by the drain. Bohumil studied it closely, the spider didn't move. Not even a tad. Every one of you animals can seriously go to hell. Just crawl off behind a cupboard somewhere, you little shit. What're you staring at? The spider edged away from the drain but didn't leave the tub.

I'm sitting in a bathtub with a spider, thought Bohumil, blowing his nose in his fingers. He peered around. Bathroom covered with mold, water heater on the fritz, rusty water from the faucet. And with walls this thick, the sun's warmth can't penetrate, it's always kind of chilly in here.

He fished around in the tools under the sink and found

a small knife. He couldn't get his mind off that tile in the corner, he'd been wanting to take a look at what was behind it for ages. He went back to the bathroom and poked the knife around the tile, trying to wedge it in underneath. He noticed a tension. Was it his imagination, or was someone holding on to the knife from the other side? And tugging on it. But he had to be imagining it. He had a growing sense there was someone else living in the house. The spider nodded: Yes, you're right, in the cottage and around it. And so many flies! I try but I can't catch them all, and the ones I miss are the ones that bother you at night. Crawling all over your face, into your ears and mouth. Gross. I won't even talk about the mosquitoes. You're almost out of anti-itch cream, the tube'll be empty soon. The whole place is crawling with mold, ready to come pouring out on you in your sleep. Not to mention, while you're asleep, restlessly tossing and turning in bed, there's something walking around the yard. Pacing quietly, rubbing its back against the wall, raising its heavy paw and urinating. In the morning you find the corner of the cottage still damp. I know you know. I saw your eyes this morning after being up all night listening to it yap. Glassy like the fox cub on the shelf down at the pub. Like beads, shiny glass beads, the spider went on cracking wise. It glanced at the rusty trickle of lukewarm water, then scurried up to the faucet. Do you dream about the sea?

Bohumil turned on the shower. The stream of water almost washed the spider down the drain, but the creature clambered up and out of the tub. What does it matter anyway, bring on the spiders, Bohumil thought, a thicket of them, for all I care. He shifted the spray from his right shoulder to his left, then back again. Thinking about the sea.

"Almost done?" she called from outside the door.

He nodded.

"I said, almost done?"

"Yep. Just a minute. I'll be there in just a minute."

"I'm not going to warm it up for him."

"All right. I'm getting out." He turned off the water and looked around. Towel, dammit, where's the towel? He didn't have the strength to ask her a favor. No more, no more begging. He climbed out of the tub. Guess I'll just shake myself dry. He bent his knees and gave it a shot. For the second time this evening he smiled. For the first time he almost laughed out loud. He shook his legs and naked butt, giggling at himself. Put back on the same clothes he had been wearing before and exited the bathroom. A puddle was left behind on the floor, she was going to be angry.

"It's on the stove, just turn it on, I need to sit down and get this done. It was supposed to go out this afternoon." She slammed the bedroom door behind her.

He struck a match and burned himself. They had never had gas at home, just a glass ceramic cooktop. He lit a new match, turned on the gas, and the flame whooshed to life. The room filled with the stench of burned skin.

"Where were you?" The boy sized Bohumil up with a probing look. He sat on the couch in front of the blank TV. It wasn't hooked up yet, so he could only use it to watch videos.

"In the village."

"How was it?"

"Great. A calf was born." With him at least it was a selling point.

"Ooo, what kinda calf?"

"Black with a little white map in the middle of its forehead."

"What's a map?"

“Like a picture of the world, cities and villages and stuff.”

“But why would the calf have that on its head?”

Bohumil will have to go back. Back to the point in the conversation before he mentioned the map. Beginner’s mistake. You can tell the boy’s in his own world. Talking like that to him won’t get you anywhere. Biologically he may be twelve, but mentally he’s six, maybe seven. The last healer, really great guy, said seven. That made them happy. They went for a sundae to celebrate.

“Sorry, my mistake. It wasn’t a map, just a white spot.”

“Who got him dirty?”

Bohumil turned to the pot on the stove and stirred the contents furiously. Mr. Question, that’s what they called him at the special school in Prague. How are you? How’re you doing? No one knows what’s wrong with him. He’s got every “dys” child psychology can come up with. And the IQ of a pumpkin. But what does that have to do with it? He loves his son. He’s a good boy. It’s just hard to live with him. Everyone has a hard time living for some reason nowadays.

“Coming right up, go sit at the table. Did you wash your hands?”

“Yes.”

“Go ahead and put something on,” he said, handing the boy the remote and sinking down into the armchair by the window. The music from *Lord of the Rings* resounded through the room. Like every week, like almost every evening. He normally didn’t even notice it anymore, but today the goblin’s tom-toms hammered at his head. With Bohu working in the bedroom next door, he can actually be almost alone. He is alone. He looked around him. Closed his eyes. He was alone.

The boy sat at the table, eating and watching the elves

in suspense. Bohumil got up, went to the cupboard next to the fridge, and took out the bottle of Jack. There was barely enough for two shots. And the evening was just getting started. Not good. Not good at all. You couldn't just pop out to the convenience store here. Maybe to the field.

He sat in the chair, drinking and watching as Frodo disappeared and reappeared and disappeared again.

The boy finished his meal. He watched the movie, engrossed. Bohumil cleared his plate from the table and washed it in the sink. There isn't a dishwasher, naturally, since who would need one here? Why would you want to save time? If anyone in the village ceased from their eternal work, the nothingness of their existence would swallow them up, pants and all. He washed off the stove. That's why everything is hand-cleaned to a sparkling shine. And once they're done with the inside, they start in on the garden, an endless paradise of meaningless work. Flower beds and roses and herbs, a greenhouse and cactuses and succulents and watering and watering, and you know that septic tank isn't going to empty itself. And if everything goes well and gets done and there's nothing on TV, then it's time to get started on putting up preserves. Phew, and that's that. It will be beautiful and the world will perish of littleness. Not even the slightest remainder of time to just sit around and talk about how it's all for shit. If labor itself is contingent on the futile endeavor to break free from the ephemeral, then here in Podlesí the endeavor is not futile. Here in Podlesí life is not ephemeral, because the market for locally and regionally produced foods is coming here tomorrow. And the rabbit show. He poured himself the last shot. Turned the empty bottle, holding it up to the window. The sun never shone in here, the

bottle reflected no light, cast nothing into the gloom in the window, not even a glimmer.

"Did you eat it all?" Bohumila came in from the bedroom, notebook in hand, glasses on her nose. She only wore them for work, but without them she squinted like a five-day-old kitten. Bohumil found her shortsighted helplessness attractive, he himself had a diopter of 5.

"Yep, the whole thing," nodded the boy.

She took out the cream, pulled down the shoulders of his shirt. The boy hissed in pain. How in God's name did he get so burned?

Catching sight of the washed plate, she nodded her head. She reminded the boy it was time to go to bed, but he went right on sitting.

"Bed!" Her tone lifted him to his feet. He slid the chair back to the table. Scratched at his hair.

"Teeth," she emphasized. He vanished into the bathroom.

"It's all wet in here!" the boy shouted.

She looked over at Bohumil. He held her gaze.

"You eat?"

"Yeah."

"What'd you have?"

"Soup."

"You're full of shit."

"I'm full of shit."

Did it matter? What difference did it make? Whether he stuffed himself with beef and dumplings, corn puffs, or nothing at all?

She set a glass in front of him, he apologized to her and lied: There was barely enough for one. He attempted a smile. She looked at him, unsmiling.

"Fairy tale?" The boy peeked his head in from the bathroom.

"Not tonight," they said almost in unison.

"All right, night night."

"G'night, don't worry, we'll be in soon, okay?"

"Hm," he said disappointedly, and vanished into the room next door, designated as the bedroom.

She got up and went to the old cupboard that stood next to the stove. She bent down, took out two metal mugs, a stack of dish towels, felt around and triumphantly pulled out a bottle of Jack. A whole liter! Bohumil took in the sight of his wife. He loved her. At that moment he deeply loved her.

"But then you buy and I'll hide it again," she said matter-of-factly.

Hide it, my love, he thought, gazing at her. Or don't. This dark libation is the only thing that topples me into bed at night and lets me get some sleep. This dark libation is the only thing that stops me from walking off into that ravine and never stopping. Until all that's left of me is a small dot on the horizon, then a little pop, maybe a hiss, and other than that, nothing. Nothing, my love, nothing else would be left. Without drinking I would have walked off into the dark forest ages ago, in a T-shirt and boxers, just like that, to save the animal the work of tearing off my clothes. Because the animal is alive out there, those sounds in the night, that howling, that isn't human.

He watched as she opened the bottle and poured them both a double. They raised their glasses in a well-rehearsed routine. To what? To health? He lowered his hand, she remained holding hers at the level of his chest.

"To us then," she whispered.

He looked at her, startled. Us, is there even still such a thing? After all that's happened? He was no longer sure of himself, let alone the status of his marriage, family,

clan, community. She kept holding her glass raised to him, while he kneaded his in his hand. Looking at her. Maybe today I should give you a kiss.

She sensed his hesitation. She tapped her glass against his and took a deep drink.

“Thanks,” he said simply.

“Don’t mention it,” she replied.

I sure as hell won’t, Jesus Christ, what was he thanking her for anyway? I was the one who dealt with it all, the diagnoses, the psychologists, the healers. The homeopaths! A few pellets under the tongue, a few minutes till the miracle happens. Me, not her. You, my dear Bohumila, you were knocked flat on your back by it all.

My dear Bohumila. My dear Bohumil.

She had a twitch in her hand. At night the wound would come to life, hacking up blood. The stitches itched unbearably. She sat out in front of the cottage, considering taking the bandage off and scratching the wound till it bled. She couldn’t tear the stitches out, it would have left scars on her hand. But the itching was here and now, the scars were the distant future. She looked down at her hand, the wounds were deep, it was going to be scarred anyway. She sat on the doorstep, right fist propped in her left hand, trying to think of anything else but scratching it. But the moment she said the word in her mind, she couldn’t think of anything else. She imagined sliding a pine needle under the bandage, grating it back and forth, the intense moments of bliss followed by a heightened desire to scratch even more. And more. She rested her right hand in her lap, observing it like a foreign object. If it hadn’t been hers, she would have gone at it like nobody’s business! With total abandon, showing no mercy.

If it had been only part of a puppet, stuffed with foam and covered in skin-colored cloth, she would have set it down on the table, cool, calm, and collected. Poured herself a little wine. Then taken a pad of steel wool and, carefully but persistently, rubbed it back and forth. Steady now, gently, now faster though, as fast as you can and press down hard. Bits of the pad would catch on the fabric, snagging on it, tearing holes. Faster still, as fast as you can. Foam crumbs flying, fabric in tatters, till the hand was reduced to nothing but an ungainly shredded cone, bearing only a distant resemblance to a human limb. Where once had been a right hand all that remained was a bloody stump, already beginning to fester.

“Mommy!”

She looked up toward the path.

“There you are. Where were you all this time?”

The boy burst through the gate and threw his arms around her waist. His heart beat hard, pounding against her belly. The blood was throbbing in his head too, she could tell from the little vein under his chin, which visibly pulsed when he was scared, or ran a long time, or both.

“Is there something wrong?” She held the boy away from her and carefully examined him.

“No, no,” he said unconvincingly.

“Then what happened?”

“Nothing. Hungry, I got hungry.”

She looked him over one more time. “What’s that on your hand?”

“A scratch.”

“From you? You scratched yourself? Here, let’s see, stop moving around.” She reached for his hand, but he slipped out of her grip and was back in the cottage before she knew it.

She stood outside smiling. This is normal resistance.

Normal! There are times I just have to leave him alone, let him learn to read the world for himself, that way I won't have to explain and translate everything.

Hearing him howl in hunger, Bohumila had to laugh. As she listened to the quiet trickle of urine from the other side of the bathroom door, she couldn't stop smiling. He was happy here. Can I be happy here for his sake? she wondered. Then just shook her head.

"I'm coming to heat up your food now."

He walked out of the bathroom, hungrily following her movements with his eyes.

I can, I definitely can, I definitely will be. For his sake.

"Hands!"

He went back to the sink and rinsed off his right hand.

"So where were you?" she asked, taking the pot of sausage goulash from the fridge. It was the only meal she could make with what she bought at Bubble's shop. Permanent special on sausages, potatoes, and goulash seasoning.

"In the meadow."

"Alone?"

"Yes, Mommy, alone." He drilled his eyes into the floor.

She knew he was lying, but let him have his friends. Let him enjoy his dirty little secret bunkers and hide-aways. She smiled again. I can hold out for his sake! She felt a swelling feeling of victimhood, indulging it to the point it sent a tingle down her spine. I'm the victim. I'm the sacrifice. And he's going to punish me for one weak moment, a few weak months?

She tried to light the stove but couldn't get it to work. The third match had just gone out. She clenched her fist in rage.

She handed the boy an apple and a cookie. "Go and build something, okay? It'll be a while still."

He put the apple on the table and took an eager bite of cookie. His mother kicked the oven door. Clearly it was time for him to get out of the way.

Bohumila stood over the burners, striking match after match. The oven was old and the knob that controlled the gas kept getting stuck. First she set it too low and the flame went out right away, then she set it too high and had to jump back to keep from getting burned. She cursed. The boy will just have to eat his meal cold. Cold because they live in this cold shithole, where even in the middle of a boiling-hot summer it's still cold at night. When Bohumila climbed out of the tub in the evening, she trembled like a chihuahua. Her teeth chattered so hard it was a wonder they didn't crack. But before she got out she would lie there alone, naked, dissolving into the rust, bandaged arm raised above the water like it was frozen in place.

A flame jubilantly sprang to life but then immediately died again. As the glow flickered through the room, she realized she had forgotten to switch on the lights. It was almost dark. She was starting to get cold. She could hear the boy humming to himself as he built something outside. She was alone. She didn't want to be alone. Where was he? Let him warm the food up himself. The boy could wait. Everyone would just have to wait. She sat down hard on a chair. Looked around. It was waiting here too. The whole village was seething with desire for action, she sensed, but something kept holding them back. As she passed through the village square, she noticed the crusty plastic chairs, the tables decorated with coffee cup circles. Worst of all, though, were the old ladies. They sat on the bench staring off into space. The skinniest one

was Maruška, they called her. She lived alone in a low-rise apartment building near the bus stop. In the morning she would put her chair out in front of the fence, affording her a view of the village square, the bus stop, and a slice of the pub across the street. She would sit, nodding off, staring into space. Maruška, you're so old! Wrinkles like cracked paint on a radiator. Maruška, grannie! Old age like a faded piece of blotting paper, tucked into the back of an unneeded notebook.

One time, as she passed the empty bus stop, Bohumila thought she heard a muffled cry from behind her, saying: "Run away!" At first she turned in surprise, then started walking faster. Until at last she slowed down and stopped. Here I stand. This can't go on. There has to be an end to running away at some point.

With her left hand she took the laundry out of the washing machine. Her back was freezing up from the constant overburdening of one side of her body. A hardened rope of muscles ran along her right shoulder blade, for months now she hadn't been able to turn her neck to the right. She kicked the basket of laundry out onto the porch. She had learned to do that like a person with no hands learns to paint with their feet. Three firm kicks and the basket was under the drying rack.

"What's this right here?" She nodded down at some sticks wrapped in animal skin. Why is this crap lying here for me to trip over?

The boy turned in response to her shout and shook his head. Not mine.

"What do you mean not yours? Will you at least do me the favor of looking at it?"

He glanced down at the sticks.

"Not mine," he said, and walked back into the cottage. She cast a resigned look at the trail. It too rattled

emptily, absent any passersby. She peeked again at her watch, anger building within her. I can't do it all myself, he practically crippled me! She looked again at the path to the cottage, littered with firm, succulent burdock.

He ran past so quickly, it didn't even stir the pollen on the windowsill. Bohumila went on standing by the drying rack, wet shirt in hand, once again alone.

Calf. Hm.

He reeked of manure so badly, she couldn't have come near him even if she'd wanted. Which she didn't. She no longer wanted anything from him. Sure, go ahead, take a shower. I'll hang it all myself. With my left hand, my foot even, why not. We're out of clothespins, but I'll just hold it in my teeth here all night.

As she tossed the laundry onto the clotheshorse, a chill crept into her. There was a strange creak. She looked around but didn't see anything. Blinded by the lamp above the front door, she couldn't see any farther than the fence. An uninviting coolness blew through the uprooted pickets. She shivered. Something barked near the forest. I'm going to feed the cats, even the sick hungry kittens with the gnawed-off ears, pour them some milk, tear up a roll, make sure they have a proper feast, but if that stray mutt comes back around, I'm chasing him away.

She took the empty laundry basket in her left hand, gave the door a shove with her foot, and stepped inside. The sounds outside the cottage grew louder. She called to the boy to come and help her close the gate for the night.

She'd brought her computer with her, on the pretext she needed it for work. But no one wanted her designs

anymore. She hadn't worked in months and couldn't muster the courage to tell him. So instead she talked about the boy, the weather, the apples ripening such a short way away from their fence that as far as she was concerned they were theirs. That strudel he'd had for yesterday's breakfast, that was those apples. For days at a time she wandered around the front of the cottage, squinting into the sun and often crying. She had to do something, find some petty job, make some petty talk with people, live a petty life. Jarda had promised. He'd promised! He would definitely let her at least work the tap, she could handle pouring coffee with her left hand.

She sat down on the bed, laid the closed laptop down next to her. Felt around for the needles. The boy had learned to knit as part of his training in motor skills. She pulled one out from his attempt at a wool scarf and thrust it into her wound. Is there anything a person won't do for love? She almost yelped in pain. Slowly, she ran the needle back and forth, but she couldn't stand it. She needed more, more. She worked it in between the stitches, feeling them burst. The needle emerged from under the bandage covered in blood. A trickle of blood leaked out, she let it be. Watched the spot of blood on the sheet as it spread, bit by bit, into the shape of a Christmas star.

She was bathed in sweat, her body shook. She breathed a sigh of relief. How long has she been lying here? She got up and walked to the door. From the other side she could hear the orcs beating their drums, she still had some time.

Lying on the bed, she stares up at the ceiling. She feels so lonely she tries giving herself a hug, cradling herself in her arms. The barking outside the cottage is getting louder. She is cold and a little bit scared. I need a shot, she thinks. Before she goes out, she puts on her glasses.

Now all she has to do is get rid of the child. Shoo, she

feels the urge to shout. So she shouts. Shoo, into bed, little one, sleepy time, shoo, my love for today is exhausted. Reaching my hands out in front of me, I see they could crumble apart at any moment, as if they were made of ash. If you touch them, you're just going to get dirty and burn yourself. Better get some sleep, my child. By morning it'll be fine. Then I'll wrap you in a loving embrace and together we'll sail through the end of our dreams.

She looks over at Bohumil. The gray that's crept into his hair has helped obscure the huge circles under his eyes. The deep blue pools of engorged veins must be incredibly heavy. He is completely wasting away in that moldy old armchair, how long has it been since the last time he ate? She wanted to caress him, wanted to tell him, let's forget the whole thing and just get out of this horrible place, I'll be good from now on. I've been punished enough, haven't I? I can't see to cook because of my allergies and I've got huge itchy bites all over, and I mean all over my body. Plus, have you seen that giant spider in the bathroom? I was in the village today, down at the pub, we've got to get out of here, my love, all that awaits us here is drudgery and frustration. I can sense their stares. There's something fishy going on, something malevolent. I get frightened even during the day. The butterflies in the meadow scare me. The people here scare me. I can sense their shadows creeping along our fence. They tread lightly, but if you sit quietly by yourself, you know they're there, you can hear them. Do you not hear them? Are you not afraid?

I need to give you a hug.

Bohumila, smiling kindly, is just about to lift her arms. But her hands are nothing but ash. Good for dumping into the fireplace and digging the hidden bottle out of them later on, that's about it.

What shall we drink to? Me? Let's drink to me,

because I want to be more than just a ball of sneezing grief, just another woman dried up and empty on the inside.

They sit facing each other, shot glasses in hand. The glow of the TV behind Bohumil shining through his ears. If his hair hadn't been so black, he would have looked like an elf, a crazy, underfed elf.

"Here's to us," he said.

"Thanks," she said. She knows what she's thanking him for, for the time, for the chance, for this fucked-up house in a ravine by an equally fucked-up village. She needs to take it slow. Not let it knock her flat on her back. I have to be a good girl, cook, clean, hang the laundry. And then sit politely and wait, for the moment when he forgives me. And when that moment comes, whether in weeks, months, or years, he'll pour her a shot and say: Here's to us.

My dear Bohumil. My dear Bohumila.

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.