



LONGLISTED FOR THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS
NATIONAL LITERARY AWARD (2024)



The Long Version

by Petra Hůlová



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

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

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

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

— S.d.Ch., playwright

March 2023

188 pages

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



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THE INTERNATIONAL PITCH

The Long Version

Petra Hůlová

She built a life on her own terms.
Her daughter has a different version.

At fifty-two, celebrated writer Sylvie Novak is taking her feminist essays on tour when her teenage daughter discovers her old journals. Judita calls her mother's youthful affair with a famous older novelist abuse. Sylvie remembers love, desire and the man who first believed in her work. As her publisher replaces her with a younger lover, she must defend her authorship, confront her loneliness and ask who has the right to interpret her past.

LITERARY FICTION / GENERATIONS, DESIRE AND CULTURAL POWER

A sharp, intimate novel about the arguments that begin in public and follow us home. Hůlová brings feminism and the culture wars into the relationships between mothers and daughters, writers and publishers, lovers and mentors. Sylvie's restless first-person voice turns competing certainties into lived experience.

WHY THIS BOOK TRAVELS

The desire to control one's own story gives the novel an immediate reach beyond its Czech setting. Questions of consent, ageing, female authorship and the cost of care unfold through a recognisable literary world. The narrator's wit and contradictions make it a strong conversation book for readers of contemporary literary fiction, autofiction and novels of intergenerational conflict.

INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATION

Rights sold: USA (World Editions), Poland (Afera). The US and UK edition was published on 8 September 2026, translated from Czech by Alex Zucker; 218 pages. [View the English edition.](#)

Critical response

THE LONG VERSION / RECENT ENGLISH-LANGUAGE REVIEW

“The novel’s syntactic complexity is brilliantly rendered by translator Alex Zucker ... [A] human story about women as they get older.”

Helen Vassallo, *The Conversation*; republished in *Morning Star* (UK), 29 September 2026

[Read the review](#)

US REVIEWS OF PETRA HŮLOVÁ’S EARLIER BOOKS

The following US excerpts concern *The Movement* and *Three Plastic Rooms*.

“Hůlová’s provocative satire of a feminist future challenges and unsettles in equal parts.”

Kirkus Reviews

The Movement · 17 August 2021 · [Read the full review](#)

“[A] frighteningly honest novel ... She is a writer with a true passion for language.”

A. M. Bakalar, *Los Angeles Review of Books*

Three Plastic Rooms · 21 November 2017 · [Read the full review](#)

“[An] extraordinary and memorable read from beginning to end.”

Midwest Book Review, *Internet Bookwatch*

Three Plastic Rooms · January 2018 · [Read the full review](#)

Ellipses indicate omitted text; square brackets mark changes to initial capitalisation.

A writer caught between generations

Sylvie Novak is fifty-two, a successful Czech novelist and the mother of two teenagers. Her new collection of feminist essays, *Extraterrestrial Girlfriends*, brings her public attention and a book tour. It also exposes the distance between the authority she has acquired as a writer and the vulnerability of her private life. Critics praise or dispute her feminism, audiences question her choices, and her own children are becoming judges of the person behind the books.

Sylvie's friendship with the younger writer David Karel is both an intellectual alliance and a source of frustration. She admires his writing and shares his taste for provocation, while recognising how inheritance, male privilege and freedom from care have helped him. David's wife Marie wants another child; he wants Sylvie to persuade her otherwise. Marie, in turn, hopes Sylvie can persuade David to accept the pregnancy. The woman who writes about female self-determination is pulled into a dispute whose terms are being set by a man.

The tour through Czech and Polish cities makes these contradictions visible. Sylvie resents being asked how she combines writing with childcare when David is spared the same question. Yet her advice to him about Marie's pregnancy conflicts with her public account of motherhood and with her memories of her own abortion. What she says onstage cannot settle the conflicting feelings that return in private. Her feminism is an attempt to live with such tensions, rather than a position she can state once and apply without difficulty.

Her long-standing sexual relationship with Oto, her married publisher, is also becoming less secure. A pink hair scrunchie beneath his bed reveals his affair with the much younger Ema. Sylvie is hurt by both the concealment and the ease with which he assumes she can be replaced. As she searches for intimacy with younger men, and later through a gigolo service, she confronts a society that still expects female desire to disappear with age.

At home, Judita and her brother Ondřej have opened their mother's old journals. Sylvie sees a violation of privacy; Judita believes the journals disclose something her mother has failed to recognise. The daughter reads Sylvie's teenage relationship with the celebrated older writer Jan Sír as abuse. A disagreement over private documents becomes a struggle over who has the right to explain a life.

Who gets to name the past?

Judita insists that Jan exploited Sylvie's youth, admiration and dependence. Sylvie was seventeen; he was twenty-five years older, already famous and married. Judita considers those facts decisive. Sylvie remembers desire, choice, encouragement and the first person to believe in her talent. She does not accept that the relationship can simply be renamed for her. Her resistance, however, does not erase the episodes of humiliation and male entitlement that emerge as she revisits it.

Sylvie remembers the literary and dissident circles of her youth, where artistic freedom coexisted with casual misogyny. The older men's political courage did not protect young women from their assumptions about sexual access. Her encounter with Jan's wife Klára also helped shape her feminism: she understood, with a mixture of triumph and shame, how a younger woman could displace an older one. Oto's affair now places Sylvie on the other side of that pattern.

Judita demands a public apology and threatens to approach Jan without her mother. She reads Sylvie's reluctance as proof that the harm continues. Sylvie finds her daughter's certainty coercive, even while recognising the force of some of her questions. Their conflict concerns both the unequal relationship itself and the language in which it may be remembered. A daughter trying to defend her mother can also deny her the authority to describe her own experience.

The dispute widens into the literary business. David separates from Marie and becomes involved with Edita, one of Sylvie's students and Jan's daughter. Edita's writing suddenly improves because David is editing it. The situation echoes the mentorship and intimacy around which Sylvie's own career began. When Edita claims that Jan actually wrote Sylvie's first novel, a question about sexual power turns into a threat to her authorship and professional identity.

Oto uses Edita's claim against Sylvie after someone tells his wife about Ema. He blames Sylvie, ends their relationship and presents her continued sexual needs as pathological. He also threatens to make the allegation about her debut public if she keeps challenging him. The person who helps bring her books to readers can turn a private confidence into a weapon. Artistic recognition, editorial influence and emotional dependence prove difficult to separate.

Meanwhile, the aftermath of Marie's abortion exposes David's evasions. He attributes the decision to Sylvie when speaking to Marie, avoids calls and admits to being cruel in the relationship. The novel keeps returning its public arguments about autonomy to the intimate arrangements in which responsibility is shifted, withheld or imposed.

A reckoning without an easy verdict

Judita arranges a visit to Jan under the pretence of a school interview. Sylvie accompanies her, knowing why her daughter really wants to see him. Jan, now seventy-seven, receives them with his young wife Sára. What begins as a conversation about literature turns into a confrontation. Judita questions him about Sylvie's age, drunkenness, abortion and the power he held when their relationship began.

Jan describes the affair as mutually wanted and emphasises that he helped Sylvie believe in her talent and supported her financially. For Judita, those forms of help make the imbalance worse. Sára defends him, while Sylvie challenges her daughter's claim to know what happened. The encounter does not make any one account complete. Sylvie feels a new shame, and recognises that something between herself and Jan has ended only now. She also regrets that ending.

The allegation about Sylvie's first book remains another unsettled question. She visits her father to find the early manuscript, which drew on him. Looking at the pages, she cannot deny Jan's editing, recalled through his green pen. Yet editorial involvement does not resolve the much larger accusation that her work was never hers. The novel connects the argument over sexual agency to the equally painful question of how a writer claims a voice shaped in relationships with others.

Sylvie receives a literary prize, but public success does not produce a family reconciliation. Ondřej attends with his boyfriend Marek, and Sylvie's mother is visibly proud. Judita stays away. She has also written to the institutions where Jan teaches and contacted other women who may have been harmed by him. Sylvie cannot dismiss the accusations, but doubts whether the certainty of the campaign can contain the whole history.

In her acceptance speech, Sylvie places the hopes of the post-communist generation beside the new generation's belief in uncompromising change. She returns to her account of gender inequality: exposure to sexual violence and the possibility of pregnancy. Now she adds a third element, ageing. Literary accomplishment does not make an older woman visible to men in the way that success enhances a man's appeal. Her public authority and her loneliness can coexist.

The ending offers a brief possibility of seeing this unwanted invisibility as freedom. It does not settle the past or turn Sylvie into a model feminist. Hůlová leaves her narrator inside the contradictions of desire, care, self-respect and cultural power. The book's force comes from the persistence of a voice that can be incisive, compromised, angry and vulnerable within the same breath.

The complete nine-page detailed synopsis follows, translated by Alex Zucker.

The Long Version, a novel by Petra Hůlová

Translated by Alex Zucker

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

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

*

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

//

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

*

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

*

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

*

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

*

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

*

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

*

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

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

*

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

*

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

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

*

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

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

*

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

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

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

*

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

*

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

*

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

*

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

*

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

*

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

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

*

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

*

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

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

*

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

*

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

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

*

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

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

*

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

*

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

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

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

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

"Rich?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Judita asks her, "Were you there?"

Sylvie parries, "Were you?"

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

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

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

Jan says nothing.

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

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

"All the worse," says Judita.

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

Judita: "You made her into a whore."

Jan: "I loved her."

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

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

Judita: "She never got over it."

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

"My mom is a wreck, you asshole."

Judith yells at her mom not to be a coward.

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

*

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

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

*

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

*

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

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

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

-END-

English reading sample

The Long Version

Petra Hůlová

TRANSLATION

Translated from Czech by Alex Zucker

A 40-page sample from the World Editions English edition, including the publisher's praise and front matter.

PUBLISHED ENGLISH EDITION

World Editions, 2026

[View the US and UK edition](#)

Praise for The Long Version

“Petra Hůlová has written a book of disillusionment and reconciliation with passionate feminism, with a particular focus on the body’s physiology.”

PETR FISCHER, literary critic and columnist

“A striking piece of self-criticism that packs a punch. A harsh, bruising and fierce confession of the heroine—an ageing intellectual, mother of two children and lover of many men—uttered in one breath. And so it reads.”

ALENA MACHONINOVÁ, Russian studies scholar

“Can a woman wake up one day and say #MeToo twenty years after the fact? Or does she have to be a member of the #MeToo generation to do that? An extraordinary novel about culture wars in our everyday life.”

TEREZA MATĚJČKOVÁ, philosopher

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

S. D. CH., playwright



Praise for The Movement

“One part *Animal Farm*, one part *The Handmaid’s Tale*, one part *A Clockwork Orange*, and (maybe) one part *Frankenstein*, Czech writer Hůlová’s novel dismantles the patriarchy and replaces it with a terrifying alternative.”

Kirkus Reviews

“A thought-provoking and disturbing dystopian tale of a feminist revolution.”

Publishers Weekly

“Hůlová’s provocative satire of a feminist future challenges and unsettles in equal parts.”

Kirkus Reviews

“Hůlová wants her readers uncomfortable, and succeeds beautifully, distorting and exaggerating admirable aspirations, asking what we are willing to sacrifice for a better society, and wondering what the New World should look like.”

Calvert Journal

“With echoes of *The Handmaid’s Tale* but putting the women in charge, *The Movement* beckons us into a brave new world where men are institutionalised and re-educated—by any means necessary—to value women’s inner worth. *The Movement* challenges and unsettles, offering a candid glimpse of the underbelly of feminist utopia, and raising important ethical questions about how far we might want or have to go in order to secure a truly equal world. Hůlová’s distinctive voice is crystallised in Alex Zucker’s fierce and flawless translation: this unapologetically provocative story is simultaneously a clarion call, a feminist manifesto, and a warning of the dangers lurking in both the old world and the new.”

HELEN VASSALLO, *Translating Women*

“In a dystopian future where women rule, society is re-educated to teach men—and women—that women should be valued for traits other than their appearance or age. The novel is dark and satirical; while feminism is in the foreground, the author somehow manages a balancing act between manifesto and critique.”

Lithub

“Hůlová’s story can be read primarily as a timeless fable about how the best of human intentions always end up paving the road to some totalitarian hell.”

Dublin Review of Books

The Long Version

PETRA HŮLOVÁ

The Long Version

Translated from the Czech
by Alex Zucker

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New York

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“In our lovely orchard
a lovely green meadow,
in our lovely orchard
a tall grass grows.
Annie is still little,
but lends a hand to mow.
I’ll be waiting for her
once she is grown.”

—Czech folk song

David and I met years ago, in a sleazy club where Oto was celebrating his fiftieth birthday and David was drowning his sorrows over his breakup with the girlfriend he had before Marie. The whole Czech underground had turned out to party in the smoke-filled, low-ceilinged room, some hunched over tables with beers, others out on the dance floor making wild, jerky moves that my kids would have called retro and Oto and Jan would have described as a relic of their youth. Whenever they were invited to speak to high school students about what it was like in the first years after the Wall came down, which was decades ago at this point, inevitably they referred to “the euphoria of freedom.” Between them they had an endless supply of stories about the old days, and they all either began or ended with booze, an interrogation in the drunk tank or a Plastic People of the Universe concert. That night, buying David shots of rum, I assumed we would never see each other again. A year later, however, David published his debut, and to my surprise he asked me for a few words of introduction. So today, in a way, he’s paying me back by speaking at the launch of my new book.

I started coming to the marketplace in the Vietnamese enclave of Sapa as a way to get a taste of the exotic in the early days of the pandemic, when no one was allowed to travel outside of Prague. In spite of the restrictive Covid measures, the Vietnamese community went right on celebrating weddings and

other life milestones at a restaurant called Đông Đô. It was fascinating to discover a place where life went on as usual, and now “my people” are squeezed in here at the first ever book launch in Sapa. Some of my guests clearly feel out of their element, baffled as to why we aren’t in one of the usual spots in the center of Prague. I smile, waving to my kids from the table where I’m signing books. The fact that they even showed up is my biggest victory yet as far as I’m concerned.

If not for the fact that David had offered some valuable feedback on my manuscript before I turned it in, I wouldn’t even have been able to tell he had read it, based on his opening remarks. He described my essay collection, rather vaguely, as “summing up the most interesting points in the current gender debate.” I chalked it up to a lack of preparation, due to complications in his relationship with Marie and the problems I knew he had been having with his own work.

As the technician unplugs the last speaker, the DJ stands at the bar with a glass of mineral water, waiting to congratulate me. I use the formal *you* with her, though she can’t be more than three or four years older than my daughter. A man I’ve seen before but can’t place checks her out from the other side of the room.

I compliment the blind Vietnamese chef on his rice pudding, and he returns the favor by saying he read my last two books, which they have in Braille at the national digital archive. He even quotes the “legendary” closing passage from the second one, where the mother asks her ten-year-old daughter if there’s any difference between boys and girls, and the girl says: “Boys think they’re smarter than girls, but that’s not how girls think.”

“Girls don’t think boys are smarter?” the mother asks.

“No, girls don’t think they’re smarter than boys,” her daughter replies.

The kitschiness of Đông Đô’s interior is epitomized by the chairs wrapped in pearl chiffon with swans. To Oto’s question “Why here?” I replied, “I’m not out to impress anyone” and “I’ve got nothing to lose.” Both of course were lies. David whispers in my ear that the chef is the first blind gay man he’s ever seen and waits to see how I’ll react. Meanwhile I’ve got my eye on a pair of women who look to be about fifty, getting ready to leave. They’re both happily plastered, holding each other up. Even though they’re laughing, I find myself reacting differently to them than I would to the sight of two drunken middle-aged men.

The launch of my previous essay collection, twelve years ago, was much like today’s. But unlike my intoxicated contemporaries, and in spite of being “emancipated,” I keep a low profile, respecting the unwritten rules. There are subjects I prefer to keep my mouth shut about, even in my latest book “summing up the most interesting points in the current gender debate,” no matter how bold my lipstick is or how progressive I am on LGBTQ issues.

My description of the landscape of my youth in my journals was perceptive and, apart from a few details, accurate. Though my current situation is beyond the horizon of what I could foresee at the time, given my lack of experience, even back then I was able to imagine most of my present-day circumstances. I take a deep breath in, slowly breathe out, then one more time. The circles under my eyes and the wrinkles at

the outer corners simply reflect the richness of my lived experience. The moment I say that to myself, the heaviness slips away like a mirage, a mere product of my own prejudices.

The wind whips a soggy gray face mask past the lone streetlamp in front of Đông Đô. David and I walk out the glass doors of the panelák past a heap of cardboard boxes, toward the bus stop at the Písnice Housing Estate. Up until the nineties, the site where the marketplace now stands was occupied by a meat processing plant. Someone runs up to us out of the dark. “We need opinions like yours nowadays!” they shout, then run away again. The street is deserted except for a handful of Vietnamese youngsters with beer cans in paper bags clustered around a sheet-metal stall with its window boarded up. Even in the dark, I can see David making a face.

That euphoric sense of freedom people had in the nineties is gone, though I think it has less to do with the times than how old you are. David agitatedly searches through his pockets. A few years ago, he would have been looking for cigarettes, but now it’s his phone. Surprisingly, he hasn’t called Marie even once yet tonight. I ask if he should give her a ring.

The taxi that shows up a few minutes later is driven by a skinny girl with greasy hair who looks to be my daughter’s age. Unlike my kids, I’ve never been worried about earning a living. I wonder if our driver wakes up to a child at home in the morning, or whether she goes to school. My generation’s worst fear was not being able to do something we enjoyed with our lives. And even that seemed unlikely, since we believed anything was possible if you wanted it badly enough.

I tell David I wouldn't mind walking a little longer still. I mean here, around Sapa—I've been wanting to show him the Buddhist temple with the plastic statues—but David proposes our usual route and says he can walk with me part of the way.

In my new book I describe the world as I believe it should be, since that's the key to making the new world a reality. The same holds true on a personal level.

Neither of us says a word. We've played this game before.

Just as a new prime minister is spared criticism for his first hundred days or people refrain from speaking ill of the recently deceased, a new book deserves a honeymoon period. Because the closer you are to that moment when the text took on its final form and you still could have changed something, the more it hurts.

By the time David breaks the silence, we're well past the Vyšehrad Tunnel. "What you wrote isn't what you really think," he says as the Podolí Maternity Hospital rises up on our left. He says it wasn't just *My Extraterrestrial Friend*, but also my open letter published in the Warsaw daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*. In the piece, which I wrote at my Polish publisher's urging, I referred to the Catholic women opposing abortion in Poland as brainwashed fanatics, which was wholly in contradiction to how I experienced them.

David calls Marie. We walk through the dark along the pathway between the embankment and the river. Every now and then, in the promenade's narrower sections, a blade of overgrown grass whips against my legs.

If I hadn't suggested that David get in touch with Marie, which understandably ruffled his feathers, he

wouldn't have made those comments about my book and we might have continued the discussion we'd started at Đông Đô about the canonical authors our generation once read—with revulsion perhaps, but still—whereas the teenagers of today not only don't know their names but aren't at all embarrassed about it.

David, in the vocabulary of my latest book, “a privileged white heterosexual man,” living primarily off his inheritance from his father, has written some of the best prose to come out in this country in recent years. “I’m more willing to support an ostensibly idiotic status quo that has worked for centuries than a seemingly clever alternative that someone just came up with yesterday” is his favorite phrase when he wants to piss somebody off. He’s more out to provoke than anything else. A lot of people find it off-putting, but I agree with David that it doesn’t matter so much how you shift someone’s thinking, the point is to do it.

David looks so cranky after his call with Marie that I almost encourage him to go home. Even though what I want more than anything else right now is not to be alone, which ironically means I want to be with the person who ruined my evening. We both take pleasure in paradoxes.

“Not that you outright lied, but you didn’t put it all out there, which some people might consider a lie.” There’s some truth to what he says. The women’s solidarity I wrote about in *My Extraterrestrial Friend* is a delusion anyway. My mother threw me to the winds when I was seventeen without a second thought, and I didn’t care one way or the other about Marie even before I realized the only reason she wasn’t jealous of me was because in her eyes I’m harmless, which

is to say, fifteen years older than her. In any case, the relationship between David and me has always been strictly intellectual.

“Why did you decide to call it that anyway?” David asks, attempting to steer the conversation elsewhere.

It was Oto’s idea. He thought my working title, *Women’s Solidarity*, sounded too much like a sociology book. “This way the title winks at the bestseller by that Italian woman, plus readers who normally wouldn’t come anywhere near it will snatch it up because of the reference to UFOs,” Oto said, rubbing his hands like a caricature of a greedy capitalist.

Four decades ago, when we were still part of the Eastern Bloc, Oto carried banned literature back and forth across the mountains into Poland, which was also Communist. Now he runs one of the most renowned publishers in the country. It isn’t just his dissident renown that keeps him afloat in the new market economy, but even more so his exceptional nose for business, concealed under the mask of a cultivated intellectual.

David comes to a stop and lets his bulky satchel slide off his shoulder onto the ground. Fishing a sweater out of the bag, which normally he uses to lug around the latest books in translation, since he looks down on Czech literature and pointedly ignores it, he spreads the sweater out on the riverbank and offers me a seat.

It’s one of those nights when the stars light up the sky, but David’s face is illuminated by the screen of his phone.

“She doesn’t get that sometimes I just need to be alone.”

“What did you expect?”

We sit closely side by side on David's sweater, and for the first time in ages I consider smoking a cigarette.

"I thought you were with her because she admired you."

"I thought it was the best thing that could ever happen to me."

It isn't clear if he means their son or the fact that he hardly has to take care of him thanks to Marie.

David talks about his son often, but in a neutral way, like something he has no direct connection to, except when he goes into a manic fit and suddenly starts showing pictures of him to everyone he meets. In *My Extraterrestrial Friend*, I mention this as typical behavior for men, while glossing over the fact that it's always been unacceptable for women.

The book is my attempt to imagine an ideal world, or the ideal struggle for an ideal world. And as much as I harbor hope that this is what it looks like to bring the future into the present, there's no getting around that all this progressiveness is part of a new conformity. That doesn't mean the people in our society who act as if they're outsiders are necessarily wrong, but for some time now I've increasingly felt there's a more fundamental injustice at work that no one is talking about, that what really matters most isn't playing out under a corporate glass ceiling, at the kitchen stove or while pushing a stroller, and all of a sudden, probably out of a frustration I don't have any other way to express, I pick up a rock from the ground next to me and fling it as hard as I can at the dark silhouette of a duck floating on the river.

"Half of our gender tragedy comes from the fact that you can rape us."

The duck isn't going anywhere. I probably look furious.

"Then how come there's nothing in your book about that?" David asks. He has a glint in his eye like a wild animal. Something in me wonders which side he's actually on, and what these sides have to do with our sex, and it strikes me that our like-mindedness probably obscures more than it illuminates, and the scene from my book launch comes to mind again, the look that man gave the DJ standing at the bar, and I suddenly see my daughter Judita in front of me. She's telling me a story using the masculine gender, and when I ask why, she says because it's a story about people in general.

We walk the rest of the way back to my apartment, then David comes up and we sit in the window, smoking a cigarette together like the old days. I put on my "Dinner with Friends" mix and duck into the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, my head starts to spin.

People tend to assume that a woman who invites a man home at three in the morning is either incredibly naïve or totally oblivious. We can rule out the first alternative, given my age, so I'll stick with the explanation that David and I have known each other so long that it's out of the question for anything to happen between us. I try to pretend I have no expectations whatsoever, that I wouldn't entertain the thought for even a second. A shared sense of humor, even when left unspoken, is one of the ways that David and I have always gotten along, and the best joke to come out of that late-night visit to my place, which we'll both pretend had no erotic subtext for me, was the assumption that if anyone had carnal pleasures

on their mind, it was David. The fact that he fed that interpretation with his suggestive comments was as much a testament to his gallantry as it was denigrating to me. Because the idea that David came home with me not to do what's expected of men in that situation but because he would never even dream of such a thing is more humiliating than anything else could ever be.

As the sun pokes its head over the horizon, I awkwardly sign my new book with a dedication to David. The door creaks open.

"What are you guys doing?" my daughter Judita says from the doorway.

I have a feeling she already knew David was here before she opened the door and subconsciously adjusted the tone of her voice, which sounds mocking in a way I've never heard before.

"What are you guys up to?"

"Your mom's signing her book for me."

"How did you like the launch?" Judita asks.

"It was great. You were there."

Judita gives me a look, childishly curling her lip.

I bend my head back over the book, which I know I am going to fight for like a lion and vigorously defend against all attacks, because, as the author, I'm certainly not about to admit that it could use some rewrites in a few crucial sections.

Here's the thing: until someone finds a solution to both parts of the gender tragedy, the women's self-determination I celebrate in my book is essentially unattainable, and the reason is purely technical. The fact that a woman is inherently rapable means she doesn't have control over her own life, and even the life that begins inside of her doesn't fully belong to

her, although in *My Extraterrestrial Friend* I describe the process of coming to terms with abortion as first and foremost a process of “freeing ourselves from the absurd guilt imposed by our surroundings.”

The one thing I find somewhat reassuring is that, as usual, none of the critics have drawn attention to the actual weaknesses of my book, as opposed to those they allege.

Judita regards David and me with concern like a mother would her teenagers. Maybe I will take her advice and stop dyeing my hair, since I think she has a point that “it’s no use anymore anyway.”

She takes the key from the coatrack and gestures to David, upon which the two of them disappear into the hallway. They have a brief laugh at something, then all I hear is the sound of receding footsteps.

I absorb myself in a spot on the wall next to a miniature oil painting of a landscape my mother gave me for my thirtieth birthday, and I can’t shake the thought that if for some reason it had been Judita here two hours ago instead of me, she and David would have had sex. Judita would later attribute my “hyperactive” fantasy to “that whole business,” ignoring the reality that unfettered imagination, free of ethical or other constraints, is an essential tool for any creative person, not a defect for which they should be dragged through the mud.

Judita floats past me to a box of apple juice, pours herself a glass and floats back to her room.

In 1991, I wrote in my diary, referring to Jan: “Everything important I know, I learned from you.” Reading the entry years later, I was surprised to find that it was still true. If it hadn’t been for Jan, I certainly never

would have had a book launch and I probably wouldn't know David. The further in the past something happens, the greater its significance for what comes after. The monstrous significance of each and every bygone detail for the whole rest of a person's life—which I tried so many times to imagine in my journal—is of course apparent only in hindsight.

As the child of a politically conformist family, it was only thanks to Jan that I met so many interesting people after 1989. The rest was gravity doing its work, leading me to Oto and his press, Formát. He wouldn't have published my debut if it hadn't been good, of course, but had circumstances been different, who knows if I would have found him on my own. Before I go to sleep, the look the man gave the young woman DJ in Đông Đô comes to mind again. A look no man gave me all night. A look without which no night like this is or can be complete. He gave her the kind of look that sustained me for years, that made life worth living, a look I thought was prompted by my unique personality. Looks like those were the high point of evenings like my book launch. But the truth was what triggered those looks that I so desperately longed for was youth, which had left me once and for all. It happened in a split second. Like a miracle. A tragic one.



I lie in bed, stomach growling, while Oto warbles in the next room, where he's making breakfast. His singing voice is higher than a girl's. With his heavysset

frame, he even looks like a woman from behind as he steps into his tent-sized boxer shorts. It's only natural to lower your demands with age, so if this is settling for less I'm all for it, I think, as the appetizing smell of eggs wafts from the kitchen. Oto peeks his warm, kindly face through the bedroom door. "Cuppa java?" A few moments later, a breakfast fit for a queen lands on my duvet.

Oto and I have been sleeping together on and off for years now. So when we're around other people it isn't hard for us to pretend our intimacy is only for show, that the touch we share is just an act, a performance of an affair between a publisher and his author, which hides the reality even while flaunting it. The sex is just how it happens to end. The most fun part is what happens before. Oto has three kids, the older two the same age as Judita and Ondřej, and we spend a lot of our time chatting about them. Oto gives evasive answers when I inquire every now and then, in my usual way, whether Žofie still has no idea what's going on. Either he's uncomfortable dragging his wife into it, or she quietly tolerates his behavior, which would make it all the more embarrassing for him. He certainly has no intention of harming her. The only thing I rule out is that Žofie not only tolerates it but isn't even bothered by it.

As I sit on the bed, reclining against a soft pillow, my publisher yet again proves his magical ability to turn an omelet into a celebration. He sits off to the side, gazing at me with a dewy-eyed look, obviously pleased to see me enjoying the food. I hold a sprig of parsley up to the light streaming into the room through the large Art Nouveau window. I think back

to the evening we shared yesterday. When we walked in the door at Klakson, a bar recently opened by one of Oto's friends, the young man behind the bar made a strange face at him, casting a questioning look in my direction. It was obvious he wasn't sure if I was Oto's wife or not, since most likely he'd never seen her. As we left, the young barman gave me a warm goodbye. Either he had made up his mind I must be Žofie or it was a display of male solidarity.

"All they know how to do is make videos," says Oto, commenting on his children's skills as I finish the breakfast he made me. Oto smokes weed, and it doesn't take much to get him worked up.

"They may not know it, but deep down inside they feel deficient," he seethes. Plainly he's looking for sympathy, but I know for a fact that my kids don't feel a thing.

Like me, Oto has his moments of analog nostalgia, but his talent for staying young at heart is as strong as his business flair, and likely the two are connected. He's constantly out and about, making the rounds of all sorts of events, getting to know the new generation of creators. Whereas I sometimes worry I may be missing out, but usually not enough to get me out of the house. The days when the trajectory of a party had anything to do with real life are far behind me at this point, and Oto can fill me in on the gossip.

Another reason I rarely go to parties anymore is I don't want to hear "how great I look," even though, really, it's the same as Oto wrapping his arm around my shoulders and kissing me on the cheek. By pretending we're going out, we cover up the fact that we really are going out, although we're actually just

sleeping together and having fun. Within that truth hides the lie, just like the lie that I look great conceals the truth revealed only in the implied add-on “for your age.” When a woman really looks great, that isn’t what people say. And the worst is when younger women use the phrase to express their sincere condolences.

I’m itching to share all of this with Oto, but meanwhile he’s floated back into the kitchen and it sounds like he’s scrubbing the pan with a scouring pad, so I dip a piece of toast into the Japanese bowl of olive oil that came with my breakfast. It actually wouldn’t surprise me if he didn’t know how to turn on the dishwasher. Unless of course he enjoys washing dishes. I remember recently he told me how much he misses working with his hands. He only felt fully himself, he said, when he was digging in the dirt at their house in the country, and he asked if I knew that monks in Tibet have been tilling their fields by hand for centuries.

Only thirty years ago, no one had a dishwasher, no one was fascinated by manual labor, and no one tried to impress anyone by going barefoot at home. When it came to me and Oto, in any case there was no need. The ten-year age difference had long since ceased to matter, and whenever one of us wanted to have sex, we just said so.

The sun streams through the Art Nouveau window to my left and streams onto an Art Nouveau mirror on a dressing table covered with Žofie’s perfumes, chains and necklaces. My face shines in the mirror. I raise my arm to a right angle and give it a little shake, then measure the delay between the shake and the moment the skin on my upper arm stops jiggling.

About three seconds. Just then I see Oto standing in the doorway, with a look on his face whose meaning I can only guess at.

But there are many factors that can contribute to anxiety, and we often mistake effects for causes while remaining unaware of the true sources of our uneasiness. So, with the aid of a short breathing exercise and the awareness that my self and my thoughts are two different and unrelated things, I once again find relief.



It took me a long time to grasp the shadowy nature of the literary world. The ins and outs of applying for funding, usually tied to another form of funding, like a grant to a foreign publisher or a translator. Basically, without support from the state, there would be no Czech books published abroad. And even when they are published, thanks to that support, they're usually just printed, that's it. The book sits around in some warehouse and no one even knows it exists. Then, after six months or so, I get an email, say, from the Slovenian publishing house Mladinska knjiga, with an official statement informing me of the sale of four copies of my novel *Kratka zgodovina Gibanja*. My email thanking them for doing a truly excellent job of hiding my books typically goes unanswered. In Poland, fortunately, things are different. I make a note in my calendar of an upcoming event there, marking the nine hundredth birthday of the author of the *Chronicle of the Bohemians*, Cosmas, whose Polish origin was recently accepted by most Czech historians after years

of controversy, which means that the oldest Czech chronicle is of Polish origin. Meanwhile I think back to the affable ex-activist from Egypt who reached out to my agent a few years ago. She offered an average sum for the rights to one of my novels, promising to publish it with “a cult independent Cairo press, specializing in the finest contemporary foreign prose.” It sounded almost as earnest as the activist-publisher’s biography I found online. After obtaining a degree in management, she was employed at Telecom Egypt until, at the age of thirty, she decided to give her life meaning by founding a small publishing house with a café that serves as a meeting place for Cairo bohemians. But a few days later, while looking up grants on the Czech Ministry of Culture website, I accidentally clicked on a spreadsheet titled “Translations of Czech Prose Supported in 2018” and found her name right at the top. According to the spreadsheet, in 2018 she received a grant for the translation of my book at a rate several times higher than the standard. She only bought the rights as a pretext to get funding. There was never any real interest in publishing my work and the novel never came out, though I have no way of knowing whether or not it was translated. Anyway, as long as the money from the Czech Ministry of Culture went to finance the Cairo alternative scene, why not?

I stand in front of a class of my students. They hang on my every word, not one of them is on their phone. The most reliable way to get and keep their attention is to discuss something only tangentially related to literature, like a writer who recycles cigarette butts or Kundera’s recipe for devil’s toast. Meanwhile my three-part talk on the Czech underground, which I

spent a month preparing and even managed to convince a few living legends to attend, met with zero response from the students. My assumption that the guest speakers' anti-Communist insurrection might resonate with today's youth and their antisystem rebellion proved to be mistaken. David went so far as to call it criminally naïve when I told him about it while I was preparing the seminar.

"They're going to boo those old right-wingers right off the stage," he said. "Besides, when was the last time you heard of Czech students holding a protest against anything?"

David is waiting for me outside when I leave the building after class. He stands by the railing, talking with a buxom brunette who sits in the second row and hasn't shown any interest whatsoever up to now. He waves to me, then turns back to her. Her name is Edita, and she's nothing at all like her father. She offers me a polite hello and resumes her heated discussion with David. I step off to the side and immerse myself in the papers my students handed in today.

"Given your political views, I wasn't sure if the ending of your book was meant to be satirical," I overhear Edita say.

"Reality has outstripped fiction," David says. "Now more than ever. Plus, the acronyms that I use are solely for stylistic effect. If real literary satire is what you're after, I recommend Boccaccio."

Edita shakes her head. She wants to read David Karel, she says, raising her voice in irritation. Then she turns crimson. I feel sorry for her.

"I take it all to an absurd extreme in my last book, *Earth Above, Sky Below*, don't you think?" David goes on.

“I haven’t read that one.” She blushes again and stammers that the book isn’t for sale anywhere.

“I’ve got a few extra copies at home. If you promise to donate it to the school library when you’re done, you don’t even have to give it back.”

David’s publisher, Radler, compensates authors for their laughable advances with a staggering number of complimentary copies. His whole entryway is filled with copies of his latest book. He has so many he doesn’t know what to do with them.

As we make to leave, Edita just stands there with an expectant look on her face. After a few awkward seconds, David steps back over to her, shakes her hand and returns to my side. I turn to look at Edita, who stands at the railing following us with her eyes.

David remains silent until we turn the corner. Then he confides that he finally took my suggestion and left his publisher.

Anyone is better than Radler, who jerks his authors around on their contracts and clouds the whole thing in a sophisticated haze as if it were some sort of philanthropic venture. As if Radler wasn’t making a living off his authors but the other way around. That’s what I told David, so I was glad to hear that he took action based on my advice.

David and I cover everything that afternoon, including the roadblock he’s come up against on his latest book that’s kept him stuck for months. He says he avoids bringing it up with Marie, which of course creates other problems, and we haven’t even reached the river yet when we come around to the subject of Irge’s “scandalous” opening, which is happening in a few days. We agree that the use of the word *scandalous*

as a selling point dates back at least a hundred years and, waiting in line at the stand that claims to have the best kebab in Prague, the one thing we can't settle on is whether Irge resents it, couldn't care less or is actively encouraging the use of the word.

We sit in the same spot as we did after my book launch, but on the other side of the river, chewing our food in silence. David takes a napkin and wipes a drip of garlic sauce from my chin. A text dings on his phone.

"She's asking when I'll be home."

I study the spot on the far side of the river. It would be quicker if he called, but instead David takes the cowardly route, tapping out a message. After a few years, most relationships, one way or another, turn into slow-burning wars like this. A futile situation I experienced once myself.

Vladimír, my ex-husband, was an engineer for an eco-friendly home furnace company. We met when he came to our building to give our co-op an estimate on a furnace. I served on the board at the time, and was an ardent advocate for community living. That day—which he and I spent going around the apartments, talking to people I had only ever met in the hallway, but who now invited us in for coffee, over which my future husband and I convinced them of the benefits of cost-effective heating—was the best day of our entire relationship. Later that evening, as we opened a bottle of wine back at my place, there wasn't a doubt in my mind that Vladimír was the one. A month later we were married, and ten months after that Judita was born. She's only a year older than Ondřej. It came as a shock when I got pregnant again.

In retrospect, it was good luck they were born one right after the other.

Across the river, a guy and a girl sit on a sweater, just like me and David the night of my book launch, and just like us, they're having a heated argument. The girl pokes the guy, then shoves him so hard it's a miracle he doesn't fall in the river. She keeps pushing him away as he attempts to come closer. He keeps trying over and over and she rejects him every time. The whole thing looks pretty comical. I remember the moment I realized, back when I was a schoolgirl, that boys could actually hurt me. The moment it first dawned on me that not all arguments are verbal. Gradually all the girls my age came to that realization and from then on acted accordingly.

David glances up from his phone with weary eyes. "She says she'd like to talk to you."

"Marie?"

David nods.

"She thinks you can talk some sense into me."

David helps me get to my feet, dusting off my pants with his hand. The young couple on the other side of the river is gone. In the book I'm writing now, the main character would immediately question whether they were ever there at all. Dreams are the lamest narrative device you can use, I reflect on my way home. Except for my time with David, I try to not to think about writing outside my workspace. It's the only way I can manage the rest of my life. Though as my son Ondřej likes to say, it's not like I have one anyway. Ondřej is sixteen and generally acts like a brat, but I'm his mother, so I choose to believe it's just puberty. Whenever I complain about him in front of my mother,

she points out that at least he has interests. The floor of his room is covered with comics he's "working on." He'll never finish any of them, but I've only told him that once. He snapped back that nothing he does is ever good enough for me. My best friend Irena says so too. She says I make impossible demands on my kids. I have no idea what she's talking about, besides my requirement that they not grow up to be animals. A few months ago, just before she became an activist, I asked Judita what her favorite thing to do was. When she answered shopping, I had to bite my tongue. If I had to choose between her setting herself on fire like Jan Palach or being a mindless consumer ...

The fleeting touch of David's hand. He says goodbye as we come to a stop in front of my building. I invite him up, but he declines, saying he needs to get home to Marie.

"Tell her to get in touch," I say. "I'll take her to Klakson."

"Where?"

"It's this new hip bar."

David either doesn't hear or doesn't care.

"I'm going to publish with Oto. I took your advice. We shook on it yesterday."

I'm happy for him. We part with a kiss on the cheek.

To my children I'm just a stepping stone. A lemon to squeeze and throw away. To some extent it's natural. The question remains, as always, in every situation, what is that extent? I'm sure Judita doesn't act out nearly as much with her father. She wouldn't dare.



Just as I'm about to put my key in the lock, Judita pokes her head out the door of our apartment. Her hearing is perfect. In that she takes after my mother.

I don't even make it out of the entryway before my son sticks his tablet in my face, yakking in my ear about whatever is on the video. He hardly said a word to me all last week—in fact he didn't even leave his room—so I make an honest effort to share his world for half an hour, even though I'd rather have an actual conversation. I don't laugh at any of the same parts as him, but the song about the UFOs has its charms, and the environmental agitprop isn't bad. There's no use pushing my world on my kids. That's one thing I realized ages ago. There was a time when I tried to make them watch black-and-white movies. Right away they started screaming, and they haven't stopped since, just carrying it over into other areas.

Halfway through the fifth video, Judita snatches the tablet out of Ondřej's hands, admonishing him to "be considerate of your mom." She's obviously being ironic.

"Where were you?" Ondřej asks.

"At work."

"That's what you always say."

"I'm always working."

"And you call that being self-employed. You're the most pathetic example of what it means to do your own thing. Everyone thinks you've got mega free time." Ondřej makes a sour face. "And the worst part is, you actually do. You can spend it literally any way you want, but you don't. You call that hole of yours a study, but you slave away in there like it was a corporate cubicle."

Ondřej's idea of adulthood is having plenty of time to do nothing. I try to explain that's not the case.

"Bullshit."

I can feel the anger growing inside me. "All right then. I was with a guy."

Judita freezes. "A guy? What guy?"

My daughter is fond of declaring her intense dislike of men, yet she shamelessly flirts with every man she meets. She probably doesn't even realize it. If Judita were a little girl now, instead of telling her stories about actors, postmen, anchormen and heroes, I would be telling her stories about actresses, postwomen, anchorwomen and heroines. But odds are, even that wouldn't help. I sometimes feel like the look on Judita's face is a little bit flirtatious even when she's talking to me. It goes without saying that she considers flirting in bad taste when I do it. No surprises there. Even I still haven't gotten over my disgust at the thought of my parents engaging in physical intimacy. My mother, however, unlike me, switched teams years ago, so there's not even anything left to imagine.

"It's Mom's life, leave her alone."

Ondřej jumps on Judita's back and knocks her to the ground with his usual move, "neutralizing" her.

I raise my voice at them, but they ignore me.

Judita says she's suspected me of having a thing with David Karel for a while now. Once when she was walking him out, she says, his wife called him.

"It was Marie and he didn't pick up," she screeches, trying to kick Ondřej off of her.

"Since when do you know her name?" says Ondřej, choking his sister the way he used to when they were in grade school.

“It is Marie, Mom, isn’t it?”

I take off my shoes by the shoe rack and squat down to study the bunion on one of my feet. That’s the last pair of narrow-toed shoes I’ll ever buy, I promise myself. The elegance isn’t worth the pain. Discomfort yes, pain no.



Oto’s generously dimensioned apartment looks tailor-made for social gatherings. Yet he rarely hosts parties, and when he does, I’m not invited, since Žofie is in charge.

My hunch that something big is brewing has more to do with my horniness than anything else. In any case, the giant couch is truly majestic.

The daylight falls at just the right angle on two large oil paintings by dead Czech painters whose worth has roughly tripled over the past few years. When Oto and I were still starting out, there were shelves on either side of them, filled with a million CDs. Now instead they’re flanked by a pair of unobtrusive speakers. The enormous bookcase that covered one whole wall of the living room five years ago is gone. All that remains are the shelves of books from Oto’s publishing house, which look more like architectural decorations. Oto has his finger on the pulse of the zeitgeist when it comes to this as well. Once upon a time, the end of large bookcases was believed to be a harbinger of the end of literature. But the end is nowhere in sight. People still buy and read books. The fact that they no longer build egomaniacal monuments out of

them to impress company should be welcomed by all sensible authors—this is the thought that occurs to me, but I keep it to myself. Given Oto's age, it's better to keep the precoital moment as uncomplicated as possible. My own arousal disorders aren't nearly as debilitating and are serviceably addressed by the use of lubricant gel.

I lie naked on top of the duvet on Oto's bed, which I don't normally do. The ceiling is spinning in circles. We went a little overboard last night. Žofie and the children left for the house in the country in the afternoon, and the opening of Irge's exhibition—a collection of personal hygiene items adorned with genuine owl wings—continued with an invitation from Oto for a drink under the pretext that we still needed to “fine-tune our promotional strategy,” a formula Oto uses in front of other people to signal when he wants to duck out of somewhere in a hurry.

As I mop up the last drops of oil left on my plate from the sun-dried tomatoes with a piece of toast, Oto concentrates on getting dressed. He's shortsighted and his glasses are on the small dresser next to the rack of collared shirts. A toy SUV, belonging to his youngest son, is parked underneath. The toys in my married lovers' apartments instilled terror in me when I was young. They demonstrated how temporary the whole situation was. Although, with certain exceptions, I was fully on board with that. No one had to explain to me where I fit in the picture. Which doesn't mean I didn't stick up for myself. But the truth is it suited me. The one thing I couldn't stand, paradoxically, was deception. One time, for instance, when somebody's wife called to tell me her husband was sleeping with

both of us, even though he claimed they had broken up, I ended it there on the spot. One thing I appreciated about Jan was that he never strung me along. He told me truthfully where things stood and said that wouldn't change. He later backtracked, of course, but as far as I know he never outright lied to me. Until the moment he swore that we had to put an end to it, but neither one of us believed that for long.

I'm touched by the sight of Oto's blubbery naked body. The flabbiness that comes with age has something of the softness of a child. We used to have sex again right after the first go-round, and sometimes even three times in a row. When I was married, we didn't sleep together. For five years or so, our relationship was limited to the occasional working coffee when I had a book coming out, or two bottles of wine after the launch, but apart from that we lived our own separate lives. Shortly after my divorce, we returned to our former routine, with my romances filling in the intervals. The moment I fall in love, I cease to be interested in any other man. With Oto, on the other hand, we often joked about his flings. He strictly adhered to the one-night rule. I used to tease him that the only reason he had the rule was to keep from getting in over his head, and Oto, understandably upset, defended himself by reciting a list of everything that was excruciating about young girls the morning after. "Everything about them that's so charming the night before," he said, to which I replied that he and my ex should get together and share stories. At first he had been enchanted by my "muse-like qualities," but the moment the spell was broken, that was the end of our marriage.

The phone rings. I stare at Oto's back. He turns and gives me an apologetic shrug. But I don't mind. I never hesitate to take an important call when I'm with somebody else.

"Yes, as it happens, she's here with me right now," he says. "You can ask her yourself." The voice on the phone offers me a decent fee to take part in a festival, but I refuse to share a stage with Kanda. I'm not that hard up.

"I didn't expect Formát to last more than a year or two after the revolution," I hear Oto's voice from the kitchen. "I just thought I'd put out a couple books on the side while I finished my studies remotely." The moment he starts in with that, I know he's feeling that strange nostalgia I've never been able to understand. Like he regrets doing something he's successful at and enjoys, instead of something else that he can't even imagine. Like a phantom pain from desires not simply unfulfilled but unspoken. Or is it just that at a certain age it's too late for anything new?

I study my body as I lie on Oto's bed. I'm as slender as ever, but my rolls of fat fold differently than they used to and are connected by wrinkles. Supposedly, to keep from gaining weight as you age and your metabolism slows, you have to work out twice as much and consume half the calories. There was a time when I was excited to think that all I had to do to stay young was eat less and exercise more.

"So, are you up for a trip to Poland?" Oto asks.

A few years back, I had a major crisis over the fact that my creative work, which I used to compare to an exhilarating roller coaster ride to the center of the Earth and my own molten core, had turned into psychological

torture, a cycle of tedious Zoom calls and invoices from the confines of my spartan workspace, bowing in gratitude for disproportionately small sums of money. It still made sense to me, on the whole, so it seemed only logical to suffer for it from time to time. But then the doubts crept in about whether it truly still made sense given the circumstances. Oto was the first person I confided this to, since of course I couldn't tell David. Between the two of us, there could be no question about the meaningfulness of our work, no matter what the conditions. It was either/or, all or nothing. A fragile thing we had to sustain and protect together. The unwritten agreement between David and me was that we each grappled with our creative doubts on our own. Oto made it clear that he didn't have the slightest idea what I was talking about. It made me realize that a misunderstanding can sometimes motivate a person more than anything else.

"Sure, I'll go," I say.

Oto smiles happily.

The next day, Oto and I amble down the sidewalk of the tree-lined street that leads to his office, a twenty-minute stroll from his apartment. Personally I'm convinced the reason he's never sick isn't because of his lifestyle, but the fact that he always feels so good about himself.

As we walk, Oto pulls out his phone with a good-humored gesture and reports: "Hlinovská says you've finally come into your own as a writer. After all the critics' misgivings about your last book, you've taken the wind out of their sails. And here's Hanych: 'Novak outdoes herself this time. She's come back in excellent form.'"

Oto played hockey in his youth. He was pretty good

at it, and the years of intensive athletic training still showed, in spite of his blubbery frame. Plus his earthy personality, which went hand in hand with his peasantlike appearance, worked absolute wonders in social situations. Unlike other well-read people, he didn't suffer from an excess of self-analysis.

"The only thing you get out of overthinking is either you want to kill yourself or you can't get it up, which leads to the same in the end," said Oto when I congratulated him on his decision to publish David, before adding that he wasn't doing so hot at the moment.

"What if I sent the two of you to Poland together? You and him make a great pair and you'd draw a bigger crowd."



A few days later, as the two of us undress at his place, Oto wonders out loud what he should do to promote our Polish tour. The reviews from Hanych and Hlinovská were great, but had no real impact on sales.

As a matter of course, I don't discuss my work with Oto. He just oversees the editing, publishes the book and handles the promotion. He's parted ways with authors without batting an eye even after years of working together. It's a matter of intuition as far as he's concerned, and he refuses to analyze it any further. According to David, the reason Oto won't explain his decisions is he's afraid to tell anyone to their face that he thinks their writing is worthless. All the authors Oto has dumped insist his so-called intuition really just boils down to sales. If you ask me, the Formát