

BITTER VELVET

A meta-non-fiction novel



Dominika Dery



Preface

The readers who see life as a sequence of coincidental events will find my metaphorical auto-biography difficult to digest. My decision to refer to my work as meta-non-fiction was never driven by the desire to appear original, but by my honest intention to tell the truth about known historical events, to disentangle the Gordian knot of intricate story-threads running throughout my life. During the ten years it took me to complete *Bitter Velvet*, I carefully examined the tissue of my early memories to make sense of the improbable and sometimes unfavourable circumstances that had forged my character. As a result of this extraordinary effort, I no longer have reason to doubt the existence of higher laws and invisible powers that clearly interfere with our modern goal to be in charge of one's own destiny. Today, I'm firmly convinced that all humans (willingly or unknowingly) are mere actors in a universal reality show.

To be honest, I don't think of myself as the author of *Bitter Velvet*. It is a true story written by fate. My role in it is that of a scribe who has humbly penned out an accurate testimony. The described events in this book are real, but to protect the identity of my protagonists, I typically translated or changed their names. Whenever the narrative may almost sound too bizarre, it merely reflects the absurdity of the post-modern times. It certainly wasn't my ambition to draw intellectual parables to speak about the profound meaning of human existence. I found the keys of wisdom buried in the landscape of my emotional experience. Poking the fertile ground with my pen, I picked them like velvet mushrooms from under the withered foliage.

About the author



Dominika Dery was born in 1975 in Prague. She studied theatre at *Jacques Lecoq*'s school in Paris, then lived and worked in New York and Sydney. Publishing three books of poetry in Czech, she set out to write prose in English. Her first novel, *The Twelve Little Cakes* was published by *Riverhead* in the US. Translated into five languages, it had received flattering reviews by a number of (back then) respected publications such as *The Boston Globe* and *Washington Post*. Having returned to Europe to walk across the continent on the *Camino de Santiago*, Dominika captured her experience in her second work of prose, *The Way of the Stars*. She settled down in Italy by the Lake Como, where she lives with her family.

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For Milan Kundera

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Synopsis

PART I. STATUS QUO

Mushroom Revolution



O N E

Pages
5-37

Little Miranda Urban believes in her little God and the Czech fairy tales. On the last Sunday in August 1985, she goes mushroom hunting with her family when Nature gives her an important sign that the times are about to dramatically change.

Swansong



T W O

Pages
38-90

As Miranda becomes a student at the school of her dreams, she finds out that the Conservatory of Dance operates like a Gulag for children. While she strives to pursue her professional vocation, she painfully learns that not all dreams are meant to come true.

Chicks or Eggs?



T H R E E

Pages
91-159

In the wake of the Chernobyl disaster, Miranda's voluptuous sister Marta prepares to marry a young Italian communist while little Miranda ponders her own physicality and the mystery of sex. Performing piano duets with her teenage sweetheart, she comes to experience the odd miracles of love.

The Greenest Grass



F O U R

Pages
160-255

To save his older daughter from a bad marriage in Italy, Mr Urban conspires with his ex-spy friends to obtain a passport. As the Urbans cross the Western border, they face a tough adversary in the Italian mother-in-law and must wage Cold War with her.

Tomorrow will be Yesterday



F I V E

Pages
256-343

Unable to hold a regular job, Mr Urban finds a legal way to earn the living as an entrepreneur during the Perestroika. After he fails to find serious business partners in the west, he turns to the east, taking his wife and Miranda on an adventurous trip to the USSR.

PART II. REVOLUTION

The Key Factor



S I X

Pages
344-512

The Iron Curtain is about to open. Miranda hopes to become an actress and play her part in the upcoming revolution. As the historical events unfold, her small role turns out to be of key importance in the plot of the widely medialised political change. She gets a unique chance to enter the Velvet backstage.

PART III. FREEDOM

Bitter Velvet



S E V E N

Pages
513-555

Disappointed with politics, the teenage Miranda fails to find spiritual guidance in church as well. Losing her faith in divinity, she strays off the right path and aimlessly roams the world until Nature gives her a sign that the way to salvation is near.



PART I.

STATUS QUO

“Status quo, you know, that’s Latin for the mess we're in.”

Ronald Reagan

CHAPTER ONE



Bitter Velvet

THE CZECH EXPRESSION FOR mushrooms, *houby*, has more than one meaning. *Houby* equally stand for nonsense or simply for nothing at all. By saying that we found mushrooms, we can also mean that we didn't find anything. A mushroom is a sponge or someone who drinks like one, but the most intriguing meaning of the word mushroom appears in reference to the times before one's birth. Whenever my parents discussed the Prague Spring, I wondered where I had been back in 1968 when this peaceful rebellion rejuvenated the collective spirit in our country. They invariably responded that I was still 'picking mushrooms' as the Russian tanks invaded Prague.

I'd say that the reason for this curious linguistic phenomenon relates to the countless years of political and religious oppression that had taught the Czech people to project our individual spirituality into Nature. I suppose that our ancestors picked mushrooms as the symbol of their faith in divine existence, because every mushroom, similar to a soul, is defined by that which it absorbs.

This theory explains why mushroom hunting became the national pastime during the difficult times such as the Soviet occupation.

On summer weekends in the eighties, herds of city folks with baskets and pocketknives poured into the woods. The mushroom hunters from Prague, especially, were extremely competitive. They frequently resorted to perfidy to sniff out the fertile grounds. It wasn't below them to spy on the locals and brutally pillage our secret hunting plots. On Sunday afternoons, back on the train to the capital, the mushroom thieves shamelessly displayed their loot to other passengers.

“By golly. Where did you find so many boletes?” Everyone would marvel.

“Where do you think?” The mushroomers invariably responded with fake humbleness. “In the forest.”

There never seemed to be enough boletes for everyone, even if an ancient legend describes the times—I was ‘picking mushrooms’ back then—when the Bohemian forests yielded so many boletes, people used to harvest them with scythes.

My family lived in a small town on the outskirts of the capital. Naturally, I became a passionate mushroomer at an early age. Our house stood on a hill overlooking the river valley. A wooden fence separated our garden from the forest. As the name of our street suggested, it was an oak wood. It clothed the swelling landscape in a green tapestry of branches with clusters of pines and firs adding charm to the whole picture. There were shrubberies for the wild animals to hide in and quiet clearings with carpets of grass, dry needles and fallen leaves. Anyone who knows anything about mushroom hunting must immediately see that this was a mushrooming paradise.

In summer, Mum used to send me to pick mushrooms for dinner. She was a culinary magician able to feed a regiment with a half a kilo of boletes and a dozen eggs. Her five-penny stews were famous with the local bricklayers whom my father employed to help us repair our house. He paid them as little as he possibly could and worked them like mules. Clearly, it was only because of Mum’s delicious cooking if anyone agreed to moonlight on our construction site. There’s nothing like creamy mushroom sauce poured over a pile of fluffy dumplings to make you push a wheelbarrow full of concrete onto a scaffolding.

If the weather was right, with regular nightly downpours, I could average a basket of boletes per day. The oak wood breathed out warm vapours in the morning and smelled of rotten leaves. I knew my hills throughout and had my secret plantations, but I never saw enough boletes growing so close together as to be able to harvest them with a scythe. Not even during the most fertile years. This is why I came to suspect that the mushrooming legend wasn’t entirely based on facts. As I was getting older, I started to understand that grownups had the same tendency to exaggerate as children.

The only mushrooms that came up in rich clusters were inedible or poisonous. I had to be very careful not to pick the wrong ones. According to the TV news, dozens of Czech families died of mushroom poisoning each summer. This information could have been a product of communist propaganda, of course. My parents instructed me to distrust the

mainstream media. Dad exclusively listened to Voice of America and Radio Free Europe. Still, the prospect of poisoning my family deeply scared me.

The big trouble with mushrooms is that several toadstools look similar to the edible species. This is especially the case of gilled mushrooms. Some of them strive to appear fashionable, wearing extravagant hats in bright pastel colours with pleated undersides. Beautiful to look at, similar to some well-dressed people, they contain enough poison to stupefy an ox. Fly agarics with red skirts covered in white polka dots represent a perfect example of toxic mushrooms that you can find everywhere. But there are also numerous poisonous toadstools able to feign a friendly appearance to lure the mushroomers into picking them along with the good species.

To stay on the safe side, I avoided collecting mushrooms with gills and picked velvet mushrooms only, which is how the Czechs call the family of boletes. Velvet mushrooms invariably dress in brown and none of them are toxic. Some of the russulas assume the appearance of velvet mushrooms, but it's fairly easy to tell them apart by inspecting the underside of their hats. Boletes have spores instead of gills. You can never go wrong by throwing a spongy hat into your basket.

The velvet mushrooms look plain, but taste good.

The major trouble with hunting for boletes is that they are virtually invisible to an untrained eye. To search for velvet mushrooms in an oak forest is as hard as to look for wisdom.

In sharp contrast to the toxic species that are usually dying to get noticed, the velvet mushrooms imitate the environment in which they grow. Boletes are extremely good in adopting the colour of the fallen leaves. You must be able to widen your eyesight and concentrate your mind to discern between thousands of shades of brown. Focusing on boletes is similar to practicing meditation. Your mushrooming success depends on your ability to relax and to perceive the unseen.

You never find a velvet mushroom if you want to see it. Similar to fairies or gnomes, velvet mushrooms appear in front of you only if they wish to be found.

“If you want to meet God, don't go to church.” Says a Czech proverb. “Take a walk through the forest.”

Due to our position in the heart of Europe, our small nation could never aspire for independence. Our stronger neighbours invariably imposed their politics on us, either by force or by corruption and deceit. In a similar way to the Irish, whenever the brave Czech

people craved peace of mind and a repose from the servitude, they would grab a wicker basket and take a stroll around the forest. This is what the ancient mushrooming legend intended to convey. It spoke of the times when people didn't need to hide their spiritual identity, because there was peace and freedom in our country and plenty of space for everyone's opinion to be shared.

But apart from a short period between the great wars, nobody could remember such times. The German occupation ended the prosperity of the 'first republic'. A decade later, the Communist Putsch halted the country's post-war rejuvenation. By the mid-sixties, the Prague Spring briefly released the totalitarian grip over our society before the Soviet Army put an abrupt end to Dubček's Socialism with Human Face. In August 1968, the Russian tanks squashed our blossoming freedom, pushing our population into a cynical, survival mode known as the Normalization.

It wasn't until Mikhail Gorbachev became the head of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985, that the Czech dissenters caught a slight glimpse of hope. Gorbachev's Perestroika promised to refurbish the political stage in Eastern Europe, to dispose of the out-dated costumes, false masks and useless props. After two decades of the Soviet occupation, the members of the Prague Spring generation, such as my parents, concluded that life could hardly get any worse. This is why we had safely assumed that things were going to change for the better.



A COOL MORNING WIND brought the nostalgic smell of approaching autumn. The pale sky turned indigo above the hills with tufts of clouds floating across the bleeding horizon. I rose early with the birds while my parents and older sister Marta were in bed. "Coo-coo. Coo-coo." I heard a cuckoo call from the forest.

Leaning out of the window to admire the sunrise, I counted the loud cries until the homeless bird grew silent. A local superstition sustains that cuckoos have the ability to predict the future. They either call out the years left to your wedding or your funeral.

"The silly bird is talking nonsense." I shut the window, disappointed with the lousy prophecy. "I'd rather die than wait so long to get married!"

I had recently turned ten and was becoming sceptical of old legends and superstitions. The initial blow to my childish convictions came on December 5, when Saint Nicolaus traditionally visits the Czech homes in the company of angels and devils. I accidentally discovered that the holy ritual was a shameless plot orchestrated by our neighbour, who impersonated the Devil. Mr Caesar forgot to change his soccer socks as he put on his costume. The next revelation concerned Christmas. I was sad to learn that it wasn't baby Jesus who put the tree in our living room, but Dad actually bought it from the local gamekeeper.

Having discarded my naive beliefs, I continued to believe in God and in fairy tales. I imagined that if I was good in God's eyes, he was going to help me find happiness in the arms of a gentle, handsome man someday. I certainly hoped to meet the love of my life sooner than the cuckoo had predicted.

As an aspiring ballerina, I was always on a diet. I made myself a pot of tea with a tiny splash of milk for breakfast and switched on the plastic cupboard that we used to call television back then. Having no remote control, I manually chose the first of the two available channels before I took my position on the couch to watch my favourite show, Studio Friend. TV programs for young audience were scarce in Normalization. Apart from the five minutes of cartoons before the evening news and a single afternoon hour on Thursdays, the national television exclusively broadcasted for grownups during the week. Studio Friend on Sunday represented my weekly dose of passive entertainment, which I would never miss. Hosted by two cute furry muppets, YOO and HELE, it featured the Smurfs and Czech-made series about the world of magic powers. Back in Normalization, fairy tales were the truest stories that the television had on stock. By using the language of metaphors, the local filmmakers deftly avoided censorship. Czech storytellers had a long tradition of inventing children's tales about dragons, devils and witches to express their thoughts about the Inquisition, the Austro-Hungarian police, German Gestapo or the late STB, run by the Communist Party.

The Czech *'pohádky'* were the spice of my life when I was growing up. It was through them that I had learned that evil might have many names, but human beings, similar to mushrooms, simply divide between good and bad souls. I found my spiritual guidance in fairy tales and I learned to observe the ways of the Universal Creator through them. The Czech God is invariably depicted as a loving, humble old man. According to the local wisdom, you can meet *'Pánbůh'* on the lonely intersection of narrow paths, mostly in the

forest. Disguised as a hermit or a poor beggar, the little God is not the sort of almighty, despotic father who always interferes with his children's lives. He's endlessly patient and respects people's right to walk on the path to hell. The little God never tells anyone what they should do. But if you prove to have a good heart, willing to share your last piece of bread with him, he might give you a priceless advice and show you the path leading to happiness. Unsurprisingly, it's always the longest, narrowest and the hardest of the many available options.