

# 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.

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*About the author*

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**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.



That Sunday, Studio Friend featured a popular fairy tale series, *Arabela*, in which a marginal actor and a father of a family, Mr Majer, accidentally invokes the services of a sorcerer, Rumburak, by ringing a magic bell. Bound to fulfil each of the actor's wishes, Rumburak agrees to teach Mr Majer to shoot from a rifle. He transports the man to the Fairyland and tragically allows him to take aim at the notorious wolf from the Little Red Riding Hood. To compensate for the murder of the indispensable fairy tale character, the Fairyland king transforms Rumburak into a wolf and orders the sorcerer to replace the naughty predator in his role. Humiliated Rumburak refuses to obey. With the help of the wicked witch, he boldly reclaims his former status and sets out to dethrone the Fairyland king with the aim to marry his daughter, princess Arabela. Rumburak works on the smart premise that the fairy tale characters are bound to behave accordingly to the official interpretation of children stories. His evil plan is to revolutionise the Fairyland by seizing control of the human mass media. To achieve his goal, Rumburak decides to use Mr Majer, as one of the actor's jobs is to read bedtime stories on television. Mr Majer tends to think of his trip to the Fairyland as a mere nightmare when he returns to his routine in the world of humans. In the meantime, the sorcerer furnishes a forlorn fairy-tale castle with technical equipment to produce TV programs. By the means of magic, Rumburak is then able to assume Mr Majer's trustworthy appearance. Looking as the actor's identical twin, he hacks into the live TV broadcast to narrate the post-modern version of the classical tales to the nationwide audience of small children.

I thought that the authors of *Arabella* found a great way of denouncing the ongoing manipulation in the communist media. By replacing traditional happy ends with cynical endings, Rumburak throws everyone in chaos, yet it's Mr Majer who takes the blame for contaminating the children's minds with stories of violence and deceit. According to the sorcerer's version of the Sleeping Beauty, the handsome prince no longer wakes up the maiden with a kiss, but he steals her jewels instead. The Little Red Riding Hood eats her grandmother and the dwarfs from Snow White threaten to blow up the Fairyland with dynamite. By playing the game of fake double-appearances, Rumburak confuses both the humans and the magic characters into complying with his perverted script. It made me terribly upset to watch the sorcerer laugh from the screen while the authentic Mr Majer despaired in the television studio, accused of having ruined the children's moral. I was impatient to see Rumburak pay for his sins, but I had to switch off the television in the middle of the third episode to go to Mass, which was a true sacrifice.

I was the only practicing Catholic in my entire family. It was my decision to become baptised at the age of eight. Back in Normalization, religious practice was regarded as something silly. My intellectual parents were soberly spiritual. They went to church for Christmas Mass. My older sister, Marta, was a staunch atheist, but despite her strong disapproval, I felt compelled to express my faith in the little God by singing in the church choir. Similar to my parents, I was an idealist, unable to negate my need to believe in something else besides the laws of physical existence.

Entering the local house of God, I could see a handful of faithful Christians kneeling behind the pews.

"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." I expertly crossed myself with holy water and ran upstairs to join the choir. "God bless you Mr Gregor." I greeted the corpulent organist.

"Where have you been?" The unhealthily looking young man handed me a battered hymnbook with a reproach. "Thank God you've made it. I was beginning to worry that I would have to sing your part."

He had a feeble, squeaking voice.

There was another choir member on the balcony, but she also sounded like a mouse pulled by the tail.

"*Ahoj* Mirka." I greeted the skinny spinster who shivered with cold by the balustrade. "What's the number of the opening psalm?"

“Hundred and eighteen.” She winked.

While I leafed through the silken pages, I heard the bells ring downstairs and the wind whistle in the pipes. The congregation stood up to the thundering sound of the organ.

*“Give your thanks to Good, Good will set you free.”* I sang as loudly as I managed. *“Good is good. His loove endures forever.”*

I was quite short for my age and had to stand on the tips of my toes to see over the balustrade, but my voice was huge. My mum nicknamed me the little Trumpet even if I actually sounded like a big one. I could sing on top of the organ as if I were the whole philharmonic choir. I noted that Father Andrew below was pleased to hear me praise the Lord with such vehemence.

“The grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” The priest blessed the small congregation.

“And also with you.” Everyone replied.

I liked Father Andrew. His rosy cheeks were smoothly shaven. He wore metallic glass frames, which he frequently took off to give the lenses a wipe with his handkerchief. His sermons were short and poignant and he was usually happy to have a chat with me after mass. Two local boys dressed in white gowns attended by his side at the altar. They occasionally rang bells and read selected passages from the Bible.

“A reading from the Holy Gospel according to Saint Mathew.” I watched the priest thumb through the scriptures.

“Glory to you, Lord!” The believers stood up.

“There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

“This is the Gospel of the Lord.”

Father Eugene closed the Bible and kissed the leather cover.

“Praise to you, Jesus Christ.” The elderly women heaved down with relief.

That Sunday, the sermon revolved around the saviour's death on the cross. As Father Eugene explained the reasons why the Son of God continued to love the human beings despite being tortured by them, I realised that he used the Gospel in the similar way the Czech artists used the fairy tales. Speaking of the Pharisees and Romans, he seemed to criticize the Communist Politburo and Russians. In two thousands of years, nothing had clearly changed.

"Have anyone of you ever wondered where the local term 'mushrooms with vinegar' comes from, referring to the experience of sour disappointment?" The priest studied the audience. "Do you remember when Jesus was being offered a mushroom filled with wine vinegar as He begged his tormentors to quench His thirst?"

Father Eugene pointed to the statue carved in wood that hung from a cross above the side altar.

"Jesus offered his enemies a chalice of pure blood in celebration of His Love. They handed Him vinegar, which symbolises their disappointment with life." The priest's voice trembled with emotion. "But despite of the terrible pain and the humiliation that Jesus suffered, He was a happier man than all his persecutors put together. The power of Love gave Him a reason to bleed, while the souls of his enemies were loveless and sour like mushrooms with vinegar."

Taking off his glasses, Father Eugene thoughtfully wiped them before he placed the frames back onto his nose. "Love gives our lives a meaning, which can't be replaced by anything else." He concluded. "Without God's Love even the sweetest grapes taste sour. Regardless of how powerful and arrogant our oppressors may seem, we should only feel sorry for them. Let's take the example from our Lord. He had forgiven the traitors of his nation and the Roman occupiers for their sad hypocrisy. By worshipping the materialistic ideology of anger and fear, they denied themselves the pleasures of life."

"Amen." I sighed.

The organ took to singing in the highest keys while the altar boys assisted the priest in washing his hands. Father Eugene brought the host above his head and broke it in two halves. Eating one of them, he took a sip of the mass wine.

*"Laaamb of Good, you take away the sins of the woorld, have mercy on us."* I sang on my knees before I hurried down to the nave to stand in the queue for the Holy Communion.

"This is the body of Christ." A smile twitched on the priest's lips when he placed the wafer on my tongue.

He probably remembered the scandal I had caused years before in the local Christian community by participating at the Holy Communion without being baptised. I had eaten several hosts before the priest accidentally discovered his mistake. Unknowingly, I had committed one of the gravest sins recognised by the Catholic Church, but Father Eugene saved me from eternal fire by washing my soul with holy water during a swift baptism ceremony.

“Amen.” I pressed the holy host to my palate and kneeled down in a silent prayer.

“My little God.” I began. “There are many things I want to tell you. I must give you infinite thanks and ask you a number of favours. I hope you don’t mind me keeping you always busy. Tomorrow I start at the Dance Conservatory. Help me get on with my new classmates, please, and give me good teachers. Also, don’t be angry with me for stuffing Dad’s cigarettes with goat’s hair. Marta told me that this was the best way to make people quit smoking. You know that I did it for Dad’s own good. When I hear him cough in the mornings, I worry that he will die young if he doesn’t give up his habit. Can you please forgive me? Thank you. Amen.”

Swallowing the body of Christ, I sealed my contract with God. After mass, I waved goodbye to Mirka and Mr Gregor and walked out to the cemetery to see my dead friend, little Rose. She was a French baby who died before her parents had permanently left our country prior to the war. I took to tending Rose’s abandoned grave, because I felt sorry for her being so lonely. For the past three years on Sunday, I dutifully watered the spiny rose hedge I had planted around her tombstone.

“*Ahoj* Rose.” The baby’s humble grave crouched behind the Polansky family chapel adorned with marble sculptures of kissing turtledoves. “Look how many nettles sprouted around your tombstone since we saw each other last week?”

I took to pulling the tenacious stalks with my hands. The nettles stung my skin, but keeping in mind the ordeal of our Lord Jesus, I bravely resisted the pain until I weeded out the whole plot. Little Rose was barely seven months old when she was buried behind the church in 1934. According to the broken marble desk that I had pieced and glued together with mortar, she died on the day of my birthday. I was always short for friends and didn’t mind to spend some time with Rose. She looked at me from the black and white picture burned onto a porcelain plaque.

Lying on her tummy, she reminded me of a baroque angel.

“God bless you, Miranda.” I heard Father Andrew come out of the sacristy door. “You

sang like a nightingale this morning. Your voice is so strong and bright, a true gift from heaven.”

“Thank you father.” I blushed with pride.

I noticed that the priest swapped his cassock for an informal outfit. He wore corduroy trousers and a pullover now. The stiff white collar was the only sign of his priesthood.

“Don’t you think it’s a waste of your talent if you study ballet at the Conservatory?” He asked me.

“I don’t think so.” I frowned. “Ever since my mum took me to see *Swan Lake* in the Smetana Theatre, I decided to become a professional ballerina. My dream is to perform *Odette* with Mr Lark.”

“I see.” Father Andrew chuckled. “Do you like Mr Lark?”

“Yes.” I squirmed. “He is the most handsome prince ever.”

“Well then, good luck with your studies.” Father Andrew patted me on the shoulder. “Thanks be to God. He shall lead you safely on your path. See you next Sunday.”

“*Nashledanou.*” I prepared to go back to work on Rose’s grave when I remembered something Father Andrew had previously mentioned in his sermon.

“What kind of mushroom did the Roman soldiers hand to Jesus when they made him drink vinegar?” I called out behind the priest.

“What was that, dear?”

“According to the Gospel, one of the soldiers gave Jesus *houba* soaked in vinegar and I was wondering what kind of mushroom it was to see if I could find it in our forest.”

“That’s an interesting question.” Father Andrew took off his glasses to clean them with his handkerchief. “It was probably a sea sponge, unless it was a morel.” He scratched his head. “I’d have to look it up in the encyclopaedia.”

“I know morels!” I exclaimed. “They look like the sponge that Mum uses to clean our bathtub.”

“That’s right.” The priest agreed. “I think you can find morels in spring.”

“My mother pickles morels in vinegar.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, they are very yummy, but of course I understand that the scriptures speak in parables.” I assured the priest. “I never realised that souls are similar to mushrooms. That’s interesting. I like to think of souls as mushrooms. They soak up everything around them. You can always find the species that are full of poison while the edible mushrooms are

difficult to see!”

“You are a good soul, Miranda.” Father Andrew smiled. “I like the way you think about everything. God bless you dear.” He patted me on the shoulder. “I’ve got to be off now.”

I watched the priest carefully shut the sacristy door, pulling the lace curtains over the windowpanes.

“Let’s go back to work.” I turned to my dead friend. “Tomorrow, I will start going to school and I won’t have as much time to look after you.”

I took the nettles to the compost and polished the tombstone with my sleeve to see the French inscription engraved on it.

*And Rose has lived the short life of roses.*

*In the space of a single morning.*



THE SUN PITCHED HIGH above the church spire when I closed the screeching cemetery gate. As I was walking down the bumpy road that stretched between the local elementary school and the train station, a scruffy dog ran out of the broken farmhouse opposite the church.

He was barking and wagging the tail at the same time.

“*Ahoj* Bob, how are you today, my friend?” I patted him. “Can I get rid of this tick for you?” The old dog licked my hands to thank me. I expertly seized the parasite between my thumb and forefinger and twisted it anti-clockwise. When the bloated insect released its clutches, I stomped it to death, smearing blood around the sidewalk.

“There you go, buddy.”

I was the best friend of all animals. It took me usually ages to walk home from church, because I had to talk to every stray cat and dog I saw. I remembered their names and tried to communicate with them in their own animal language. Having passed the pub called Under the Hill, where the male Christians typically engaged in flushing the host with beer after Mass, I walked up a narrow laneway that wound up between the gardens. There was some kind of domestic animal behind every fence. By the time I had climbed the hill, exchanging the conversation with all my friends, it was nearly midday.

The smell of roast meat wafted out from our neighbours' windows and I heard the chinking of cutlery.

“MI—RAN—DAAA!”

The wind carried Mum's voice across the whole valley. Gliding between the hills and above the train tracks, it bounced off the rock on the opposite side of the river.

“Mi—ran—daaaa! *Mi—ran—daaaa!*” The fading echo spilled onto the fields that spread in the direction of Prague.

Standing on top of our hill, I couldn't help marvelling at the magic view that opened in front of me. Grey alders, weeping willows and poplars embroidered the river that snaked across the patchwork of trimmed fields. The TV tower clothed in red and white stripes perched on the opposite hillside, needling the baroque clouds. Our town nestled into the green hills like an oasis of peace made of picturesque art-deco villas with pitched roofs, turrets and skewed chimneys. Painted in sweet pastel colours, the small houses below reminded me of pastries.

This was the delightful world of my childhood from which I was about to step out to pursue my studies in the capital. Far in the distance, the midday express rattled across the bridge over the river. I heard the horses neighing hungrily in Mrs Backyard's farm on the other side of our hill.

“MI—RAN—DAA!”

“Yes. I'm coming!” I shouted at the top of my lungs, sprinting to our cul-de-sac. Our house was the last and the biggest in the whole street. Far from being perfect, it was my paradise. My father never had enough money and time to fix it properly. He left it in a permanent state of reconstruction.

“*Dobry den*, Mr Šimek.” I greeted an old neighbour who seemed busy raking invisible leaves under the walnut tree opposite our garage. “Aren't you having lunch?”

Mr Šimek was a notorious gossip who ran his words together so badly, no one could understand what he was saying. Raking the leaves in front of his fence was his excuse to come out and spy on our family. His favourite pastime was to entice me into inarticulate conversations.

“Hurpleh dildo.” He rambled. “Idea ovary hogwash. Ivy whore yoga man koala?”

“That's right.” I guessed his question. “I'm running a bit late.”

“Wirrah yo below?”

“In church.” I replied.

“Aaaah, wreath?” He eagerly raked his way towards me. “End of yo bellow ding-dong incork?”

“Praying to the little God, Mr Šimek.” I backed away. “Sorry, I’ve got to run. Mum is going to be angry if I’m late for lunch.”

I unlocked the door and shut it behind me with relief.

Some of our neighbours could be quite annoying. While they loved to criticise the communist regime over a glass of beer in the Under the Hill Pub, they were invariably prepared to comply with it. Dad suspected that several people who lived in our street informed on us. I never knew which ones, but it was easy to guess. Those who had bad conscience pretended not to see me as I walked past their gardens and ignored my loud greetings. If they couldn’t avoid the direct confrontation, they behaved with unsettling cordiality, which gave me toothache. Behind my back, I was sure, they instructed their children not to play with me.

“Who have you been talking to?” I heard a booming voice.

Looking through the glass-panelled door, I saw my father stand on a ladder, leaning against the prototype of an automated chemical kit that he had recently built inside our garage. The Aparatura was the latest invention that my father decided to develop into a patent. Having forged a friendship with an elderly scientist, Dr Steinein, Dad dedicated his life to promoting technical progress.

“*Aboj* there.” I greeted him. “I bumped into Mr Šimek.”

“I bet you did. He’s been sniffing around our doorstep since breakfast.” I watched my father fasten a loose valve with a spanner. “I spoke to him outside earlier on. And since I was in a good mood,” he said, “I decided to relieve him of his misery and show him the Aparatura.”

“You didn’t invite him in?” I was shocked.

The mysterious chemical kit stood wedged between the garage floor and the elevated ceiling, leaving no space for our car, which we had to park outside. Two dozen glass containers and copper vessels fitted with spiral heaters and hermetic valves hung from a metallic frame. A tangle of plastic tubes interconnected the whole system operated by a computer as large as a wardrobe. The Aparatura represented my father’s bold attempt to make a living as an entrepreneur. As a Prague Spring dissident, he found it impossible to keep a regular job during the Normalization. By the mid-eighties, after the Perestroika loosened restrictions on private activities, Dad was able to start working for himself. He

secured a formal platform for his activities by befriending the chief of an agricultural cooperative in Moravia. Comrade Kocián ruled over the fields where Napoleon had once won his famous battle. Convinced of being an accidental blood relation to the French emperor, the entrepreneurial communist was hardly afraid of taking risky decisions. In exchange for a substantial share in the profits from the Aparatura's production, he had cheerfully agreed to provide Dad with political cover. Still, as far as I could tell, the whole operation didn't entirely comply with the communist jurisdiction which is why my father preferred to keep the Aparatura hidden from our gossiping neighbours.

"Šimek caught wind that I'm working on something unusual here." Dad climbed down the ladder to swap his spanner for a cigarette. "Last night, due to a weird technical error on the lines," he growled, "I heard Šimek speaking on the phone to his brother when I picked up the receiver. It sounds like a joke, but he called me a terrorist. I'm apparently trying to make an atomic bomb in our garage."

"What?" I exclaimed. "How did you understand what he was talking about? I can never tell what Mr Šimek says."

"It's not so important if he really thinks that I produce weapons." Dad shrugged. "I thought it was probably better to show him what we are doing here rather than to let his fantasy run wild." He exhaled smoke. "I treated him to a glass of homemade schnaps and explained to him that I'm working on this project under the banner of the cooperative. Hopefully, this will shut the old gossip up or he's actually going to tell everyone about it, which could be even better!"

In the aftermath of the Soviet invasion, my father had trouble finding and keeping employment. As a fresh holder of a degree in economics, he briefly held an important position in the reformist government during the late sixties, before he was dismissed for opposing the occupation. Following a period of unemployment prior to my birth, he was eventually able to earn a decent living as a cab driver. When the secret police began to conscript the cabbies as informers, however, Dad opted to quit. By the mid-eighties, he survived by developing technical projects for various agricultural cooperatives, seeing that farmers tended to be more lenient in terms of political scrutiny. As Gorbachev came to power and encouraged individual endeavour, Dad boldly concluded that the time was ripe to invest our savings into promoting science and technical progress. Convinced that the future belongs to nature-friendly technologies, he hoped to make a fortune by producing a miraculous, honey like, anti-static potion that promised to resolve half the humanity's

problems.

“Jirka, could you please shut this stinky machine down?” Mum stood in the doorway, fanning herself with her hand. She was always sceptical of the Aparatura that filled our household with dubious chemical smells. “How come you’re working on Sunday?” She sounded unimpressed. “The soup is getting cold and the pork cutlets will taste like shoe soles.”

“I swear to God, Aličko, I’m coming down at once.” My father typically used the diminutive form of Mum’s name, Alice, whenever he felt guilty. “I just had a great idea last night and had to try it out.”

I saw him press a red button on the giant computer’s control board. The Aparatura unhappily spewed an acrid smell, making a similar sound to a steam locomotive when it comes to a halt. Exhaling a cloud of smoke, my dad stomped out his Sparta before he followed me to the dining table.



BACK IN COMMUNISM, STRICT government regulations allowed the citizens to occupy a limited amount of square feet per capita, depending on the size of the family. Property owners faced the obligation to rent the surplus space to assigned tenants, yet we lived in a big house all by ourselves. My father was able to break the rules, because we officially resided on a construction site. For seven years now, our exterior walls exposed bricks. A jungle of weeds concealed the scattered construction material in our garden. Ditches filled with muddy water ran across our property and sagging mounds of gravel shaped its landscape. Like an enchanted castle, our house featured rooms that I wasn’t allowed to visit. They invariably contained fibreglass, rolls of tarpaulin and boxes with bathroom tiles. Mum kept the forbidden doors locked, stuffing wet rags around the thresholds to prevent the brick dust from contaminating the rest of our house. It was omnipresent, however, despite all taken precautions. She mopped it up and down the stairway two times a day.

“Why don’t you look at it from the bright side, Aličko.” Dad responded to her bitter lamentations. “As long as our house remains broken, the National Committee can’t force another family of sub-letters on us!”

Dad could make lemonade out of any lemons and he frequently used this gift to his advantage. “You wouldn’t want to see the Nedbals move back in.” He never missed the opportunity to remind us of the times when we shared our villa with a family of local informers. “Don’t worry, sweetie.” He characteristically concluded. “I’ll finish our house before you’ll grow old.”

With a shock of prematurely grey hair and piercing yellow eyes framed by glasses, my father looked like an aging wolf. He was short and lean, covered in hard muscles. Only recently, I noticed that he was beginning to grow a small beer gut.

“Guess what, Alice? I asked Šimek to take a look at the atomic bomb in our garage.” Walking over to the fridge, my father pulled out a beer bottle and cracked it open. “You should have seen his face when he walked into our garage.” Dad chuckled. “He reminded me of a mouse ploughed out of the field!”

This was one of Dad’s favourite expressions, which described someone in a state of absolute shock. His laughter was contagious. I couldn’t help laughing along. Only Mum remained serious.

“Aren’t you afraid that he’s going to denounce you to the National Committee, Jirka?” She typically fretted.

“Nah. Šimek is scared to death of me by now. He worries that I’m listening in on his phone line.” Dad carried his Pilsen Urquell to the dining table. Pouring it into a glass, he switched on the radio. “Let’s hear what’s new in the world of politics.”

*“Grrrr . . . according to Václav Havel . . . yuuii . . .”* Dad’s Toshiba wireless squealed and crackled. *“The local Politburo continues to ignore . . . yuuii . . . proposed policy changes . . . grrrr . . . in complete disregard to Gorbachev’s politics. . . yuuii.”*

The jamming frequency disrupted the radio news with loud whirring sounds as if evil Rumburak was hard at work, trying to disable alternative broadcasts from the West. The Voice of America sounded like a ghost calling from the grave.

“Can’t you turn the radio off during lunchtime, Jirka?” Mum roared from the kitchen.

This was our family game.

“What was it?” My father crankily pressed his ear closer to the speaker. Failing to understand the reporter’s words, he pulled the antennae all the way out and twisted it in a futile search for a better reception. I watched him move the radio around the table until he located a spot where the Voice of America sounded slightly more comprehensible.

“Miranda, can you call your sister to the table?” Mum’s voice betrayed a mounting

frustration. “I really don’t know how to make everyone turn up on time.”

The roaring of a blender swallowed her words.

“I can’t hear anything!” Dad sounded furious.

“Marta!” I rang the cowbell that hang in our stairway. “Wake up. It’s lunchtime.”

I heard the banging of doors.

“Stop that noise!” A heavy stomping of feet preceded my sister’s arrival. Marta stood at the top of the stairs in all her glory. She was a voluptuous blonde with Marilyn Monroe’s bust and a sultry glare in her black-rimmed eyes. Ten years older than me, my sister never bashed me if she became annoyed, but she developed an odd habit to lie on top of me whenever she intended to press the point. Given her excessive weight and the size of her bosom, she would virtually smother me with her sex appeal. I preferred to keep a safe distance from Marta and retreated to the kitchen before she came down.

“This is for Dad.” Mum handed me a plate filled with soup. “Don’t spill it.”

She might come across as being severe, but my mother had a sweet nature and was uncommonly wise. Her eyes were celestially blue. She wore her brown hair parted in the middle, tied into a ponytail. In her early forties, she still had a smooth skin and youthful figure. Only two deep wrinkles around her mouth gave evidence to a heartbreak she had suffered in the wake of the Soviet invasion when her parents rejected her for having supported the Prague Spring.

My maternal grandma, whom I had never met, was allegedly a powerful communist, feared by many people and worshipped by all. As a respected member of the left wing aristocracy, she was famous for wearing mink furs and diamond rings in times when the former bourgeoisie was facing hard labour as a punishment for having subscribed to a wasteful lifestyle. Dubbed as the Red Countess, my grandma grew up in a wealthy family during the twenties. Highly emancipated, she was able to obtain a university degree in medicine. She apparently drove her own car and ran a successful private practice as a gynaecologist until the end of the war. After the communist putsch, Grandma swapped gynaecology for politics. Overseeing the de-privatization of the national healthcare, she continued to enjoy her privileged status in the name of class equality. My mother often recalled how her family purchased discounted luxury goods in a diplomatic shop. They occupied a six-bedroom apartment serviced by a maid. Our house used to be a part of Grandma’s wealthy estate. In the sixties, when the reformed press began to criticize the double standards of the communist elites, the Red Countess encouraged my newlywed

parents to move to her summer villa to keep the property in the family. After the Soviet invasion, Grandma sided with the neo-conservative powers, becoming immune to any criticism. In reaction to a violent clash in political opinions, the Red Countess took my mother to court. She attempted to evict us on the grounds that my mum and dad were enemies of the socialist state. Against all odds, following a few years of manipulated proceedings, my parents succeeded in winning the public argument. We were able to keep our home, but the bitter battle had left Mum with deep emotional scars.

“How was your singing in church, little Trumpet?” She asked me when we gathered around the table. “What did Father Eugene preach about in his sermon?”

“Mushrooms with vinegar.” I blurted out.

My parents exchanged amused looks and Marta burst out laughing.

“Priests always talk mushrooms!” My sister’s opinion of religion was low. According to her belief, anything to do with spirit was pure hogwash. This was exactly the point she intended to make.

“Don’t be blasphemous!” I reprimanded her. “You’ll end up in hell.”

“Oh really? I’m so scared.” Marta crossed herself with drinking water. “Sorry God.” Putting on a pious face, she looked up to the ceiling.

It always took me a while to see through my sister’s mockery. “You’re a hypocrite!”

“Mushrooms!” She poked out her tongue at me. Planting the thumbs in her ears, she started to wave hands like wings. “You don’t even know what the word hypocrite stands for.”

“Stop it!”

I reached across the table to push her, knocking over a glass of water.

“Look what you’ve done!” Marta mopped her flooded cleavage with a napkin. “You ruined my shirt.”

“Silence!” Dad roared. “I can’t hear a word.”

*“Grrrr . . . Ronald Reagan said . . . yuuii . . . must keep up the arm race . . . grrrr . . . until the Soviet economy will inevitably collapse . . . yuuii.”*

This was our typical Sunday lunch.

“Is there a chance that we could eat like a normal family?” My mother’s voice spiralled into the dangerous zone. “Miranda. Marta. Can’t you control yourselves? And you, Jirka? How many times do I have to ask you to respect my rules? Stop trying my patience!”

“Now what have I done?” My father growled.

“You’ve heard the Voice of America earlier this morning.” My mother’s tone became sharper than her carving knife. “I’m not going to beg you!”

“Alright, alright. There’s no need to yell.” Dad turned off the radio and crushed his cigarette with a tragic gesture.

We finished our soup in silence, listening to the sound of spoons clicking against the porcelain plates. After my mother brought in the tray with caramelized pork cutlets and potato dumplings, my father’s mood visibly improved.

“Lovely.” He rubbed his hands. “What were you saying about the mushrooms with vinegar, Trumpet?”

“Father Eugene said that the *houba* soaked in vinegar, which the Roman soldiers gave to Jesus when he was dying on the cross, symbolises people’s disappointment with life.” I nibbled at my miniature portion. “He explained to us that human souls are similar to mushrooms and I agree with him.”

“If souls were like mushrooms, yours would be a puff-ball.” Marta snidely observed.

“Mine is like a satin boletus.” I protested. “Yours is a slimy russula.”

“That’s an interesting concept.” My mother couldn’t help smiling.

“You sound like a little philosopher, Trumpet!” Dad ruffled my hair. “Give my best regards to Father Eugene next time you see him.”

I puffed out my chest and gave Marta a look of moral victory.

“Why don’t we go mushroom hunting after lunch?” Mum proposed. “The girls start school tomorrow. God knows, this could be our last opportunity to spend an afternoon together as a family.”

“Yes!” I cried. “Maybe we can find the Christ’s mushrooms.”

“I don’t want to go outside.” My sister rolled her eyes, pouting her lips like Marilyn Monroe. “I have to study Italian.”

Marta was never famous for being a hardworking student. During an exchange trip to Hungary a year before, she had met a young Italian engineer. Since that day, she took to spending her free time in bed with an Italian dictionary, scribbling ‘*ti amo*’ all over her workbooks.

“You can practice irregular verbs while you walk around the woods.” Mum suggested.

“It’s a nice day.” Dad scratched his head. “I was hoping that you’d help me lay some bricks to get ahead with the construction before it gets cold.”

My father’s idea of good times together in family always seemed to involve mixing

concrete in our garden. He employed Mum and Marta to service the rusty cement mixer while my specialisation was to knock off dry mortar from recycled bricks.

“You must be joking.” A wild look appeared on my mother’s face.

She looked like a panther about to pounce.

“Okay, okay, forget it, Aličko.” Dad quickly backed off, putting his arm around her shoulders in a reconciliatory gesture. “I don’t think there are any mushrooms left in our forest, but we can always try to look for them.”

“Hurray. Hurray.” I danced around the dining table, collecting the empty plates.

“Even if we don’t find any mushrooms, we can pick pinecones and throw them at each other!” I rejoiced.

“*Ježišmarja.*” Marta moaned, meaning that I was hopeless. “You really are good for mushrooms.”



FALTERING SUNBEAMS SHONE through the trees and splashed the ground with gold. Coming out of our front door, we took a goat trail that passed through a wall of raspberry shrubs at the end of our cul-de-sac. Leaves rustled in the warm breeze and the trees crackled and sighed overhead like aching humans. I ran in circles around my parents while Marta reluctantly followed behind. Mum and Dad walked together, holding hands like lovers. We didn’t carry any baskets, because, according to Dad, we stood more chance to find mushrooms if we went to the forest empty handed.

“This is the law of happenstance.” My father insisted. “You only find boletes when you have nothing to carry them in.”

A crust of dry leaves and twigs crunched beneath our shoes when we made our way around Bobovka. This was the highest point in our forest where thunderstorms frequently broke loose and lightning bolts hit the ground.

“Let’s have a look.” Dad thoughtfully grabbed a pinch of soil and rubbed it between his fingers. “It’s quite moist. What do you think Alice?” He pointed up to the steep slope. “Maybe we should search the ground on Bobovka?”

“Let me think about it.” My mother leaned against a tree with her eyes closed. “I see mushrooms everywhere now.”

My mother’s visions and dreams had a long tradition of coming true, including the one

about my birth. This time, however, she merely showed her delicate sense of humour, meaning that she could see nothing.

“You have to look with your nose.” I lectured her.

To demonstrate my theory, I kneeled down and pressed my nostrils to the ground. Savouring the scent of deer pellets, decayed leaves and wet mould, I concluded that the mushrooming season was far from being over. The soil retained warmth and the right amount of moisture to promote the growth of velvet mushrooms.

“Let’s search the slope.” Dad commanded. “Marta can walk ahead of us. This way we won’t lose her.”

“Oh no.” My sister let out a harrowing sigh. “Why do we have to go up? Can’t we go down?”

“Because we’re not likely to find any velvet mushrooms in the valley.” Dad sounded annoyed. “Hurry up and stop looking so bored.” Picking up a dead branch, he lightly whipped Marta’s bottom as if to hustle a cow.

“Ouch.”

I watched my sister scramble up the steep hillside covered in pieces of slate, grass and lichen. Marta’s shoes hopelessly slipped. She looked pissed off and clumsy with her big breasts bouncing off her chest. As soon as she disappeared from Dad’s view, she found a shelter behind a thick hedge.

I saw her heave down onto a tree trunk.

“I’ll search the other side of Bobovka.” I said to my parents.

The sky turned orange and the wind grew stronger, blowing from the north. The oak forest swayed, sounding like an ocean rolling onto a beach. A lonely woodpecker busily chiselled the bark overhead. Robins and finches twittered in the branches. I saw a hare squatting behind a blueberry bush. Ants transported their eggs to the hill and butterflies fluttered wings in the fading sunshine. I armed myself with a wooden stick. Poking the ground, I searched around the protruding tree roots in hopes of finding the Christ’s mushroom. There seemed to be none, but I found a large Judas’ Ear growing from an elderberry tree bark.

“Please, my little God.” I prayed. “Help me find velvet mushrooms.”

When I looked up, I suddenly had the impression of seeing an old man resting on a boulder by a crossing of paths. Dressed in a simple linen tunic, he was barefoot and had a small white dog sitting by his side. My little God looked exactly as the Czech fairy tales

described him. He smoked a porcelain pipe, puffing out rings.

“*Ahoj* there.” I greeted him. “I’m sorry I don’t have a piece of bread to share with you, but I sang for you in church this morning.” I said. “Did you hear me?”

The little God nodded, patting his dog on the head.

“I was hoping to pick boletes. Mum wanted to make dinner to celebrate the end of holidays.” I told him. “Do you mind showing me where I can find them?”

The little God smiled and took a long puff from his pipe. Pouting his lips, he made a couple of extra-large rings. As the wind carried the smoke to the top of Bobovka, the rings changed the shape, becoming hearts, like a promise of eternal love that hung above the clearing.

“Are you trying to say that I should go where the lightning usually strikes?” I asked.

The old man shrugged and before I could thank him, he was gone.

Walking on all fours, I clambered over the rocks. To stop myself from slipping, I held onto the shrubs. I nearly made it to the top when I saw my mother crouching behind a copper beech.

“Shhhh, little Trumpet. Look there.” She stared ahead.

On a grassy patch surrounded by birches stood a motionless doe with her soft ears pointed towards us. Ducking behind a tree, I held my breath.

“*Do prdele.*” I heard my father stumble behind me.

The frightened doe sprang into the hedges. I saw her white bum shine through like a spotlight while she ran down the slope. Mum and I exchanged looks and sighed. There was a shallow crater on top of Bobovka. I started to search it, poking the dry leaves with my stick.

“Did you see the doe?” I addressed Marta who was sitting nearby, daydreaming.

“What doe?” She yawned.

“The one that just ran away in front of you. Didn’t you see her?”

“I’ve seen nothing.” My sister blinked against the setting sun. “I’m tired.”

“Have you found any mushrooms?”

“Nah.”

“Did you try to look?” I prodded the ground around her.

“Mushrooms.” She shooed me away. “Leave me alone.”

Turning around, I nearly stumbled over a brown hat.

“Look, what’s here?” I kneeled down to examine the soft, yellow underside. “Mum!” Picking the mushroom off the ground, I held it above my head like a trophy. “I found a

boletus!”

“Show me.” My mother came running across the clearing. “Look there’s another one!”

“There are hundreds of boletes!” My father boomed. “Marta are you blind? Have you been sitting on this plantation the whole time and saw nothing?”

It was as if the scales fell from my eyes. I could see so many brown hats around the clearing I didn’t know where to put my feet. It seemed like a miracle. Clusters of velvet mushrooms sprouted from the plush grass, growing so close together, we could have harvested them with a lawn mower.

“Thank you, my little God.” I made the sign of the cross.

“The trick is to find the first one!” Mum told me. “Once you know what shade to look for, you start seeing them everywhere.”

“What are you waiting for, girls?” Dad took off his flannel shirt and spread it on the ground. “Let’s throw everything in there.”

There was something dangerously obsessive about reaping such an abundant harvest. I watched my father behead one boletus after another, greedily raking the hats onto the chequered fabric as if they were made of gold.

“Don’t stand there like a salt pillar, Marta.” My mother handed a pocketknife to my dumbfounded sister. “Start cleaning the stalks.”

In half an hour, we gathered over ten pounds of velvet mushrooms and there were countless more left on Bobovka. Mum and I knotted up the hems of our skirts to make improvised bags. Marta wore pants, but she was able to stuff some mushrooms into her cleavage.

“What are you Urbans up to?” A familiar voice croaked behind my back.

I turned around to see an old neighbour drag a panting Labrador across the blueberry shrubs.

“*Dobry den*, Mr Hašek.” I greeted him. “Look what we’ve found!”

The notorious gossip lived next door to us. In a similar way to Mr Šimek, he was completely harmless. Suffering Alzheimer disease, Mr Hašek could never memorise any information for more than five minutes and he invariably ended up asking me the same questions all over again.

“Good heavens!” The man threw up his hands. “I don’t recall seeing so many velvet mushrooms since the war.”

“I bet you can’t.” I heard Marta mumble.

My mother gave her a look.

“This is a clear sign that the times are about to change, Mr Hašek!” Dad patted the neighbour on his frail back. “Nature never lies. The time is clearly up for the bloody Comanche to roll off the breadboard.” Using another of his trademark expressions, my father confidently wiped the pocketknife into his trousers. “I give the Bolsheviks a year or two at most.”

“Do you believe so, Mr Urban?” Mr Hašek lapped up his words. “You are always so optimistic. I wouldn’t be so sure.”

The black Labrador miserably wheezed. The pink tongue hung out of his snout like salami. “*Aboj* Hector.” I loosened his tight chain collar. “Would you like to eat a velvet mushroom?” The dog didn’t seem to be interested.

“Remember my words, Mr Hašek.” Dad hollered across the woods. “These velvet mushrooms are a clear sign that the revolution is near!”

“Why don’t you hold the hem of your shirt?” Mum offered our neighbour a pile of boletes. “This should be enough for a good *smaženice*.”

She referred to the popular meal made of English bacon, onions, garlic and velvet mushrooms. It tasted the best with fresh dark bread.

“Dear me, you are too kind, Mrs Urban.” Mr Hašek seemed surprised at my mother’s generosity.

“Isn’t this what neighbours should do?”

“Oh yes, of course.” He keenly agreed.

“It’s far better to do one another favours than to make hell out of each other’s life, correct?” Dad meaningfully cleared his throat. “What do you think?”

“*Svatá Pravda*. I couldn’t agree with you more.” Our neighbour fervently nodded, but I could see that the hidden reproach in my father’s voice stung him. “Heel, Hector.” He nervously jerked the dog’s chain.

As soon as Mr Hašek disappeared from our view, Marta snorted with derision and spat on the ground. “Why did you give him anything, Mum?” She wondered. “I bet he would never share his mushrooms with you.”

“Why shouldn’t I be nice?” My mother shrugged. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

“Let’s get going.” Dad wrapped his shirt into a bulky bundle and tied up the sleeves. Lifting it onto his shoulders, he headed home. We marched behind him like a flock of chickens, following a proud rooster.

As we walked on the path that curves down alongside Bobovka, I saw a chubby young woman riding a horse towards us.

“*Aboj Vendula!*” I recognised the daughter of the local dog-breeding enthusiast who transformed her Art-Deco villa into a farm. “Look what we’ve found! There are heaps of velvet mushrooms growing on Babka!”

I liked Vendula Backyard. I was a regular visitor in her mother’s private zoo. Besides looking after a thirty-some pack of pureblood Dachshunds, the Backyards had six cats, a couple of cows, three horses, two pigs, a pony, a monkey in a cage and a goat called Lisa. Vendula’s mother sold surplus milk to my parents. It was my responsibility to carry it in a pail across our hill twice a week.

“Wow. This must have been your lucky day.” The girl struggled to keep her animal still while we walked past her.

“It can be yours too, Vendula.” My father laughed.

“Hello Bonnie.” I scratched the horse on the neck. “Would you like to eat a boletus?”

The brown mare and I were friends, as Vendula occasionally allowed me to ride her. Bonnie was always keen to eat anything, but this time around, she merely sniffed the mushroom and turned her head away.

“Nah, she’s like me. She prefers to eat sugar.” Vendula guffawed, spurring the mare. “Come on, Bonnie. Move your bum.”

The animal lifted her tail and blessed the path with steaming ‘doughnuts’ before she stomped away.

At the next path crossing, we took the goat trail down to our house. It was steep and slippery. I had to be careful not to drop my precious load. Coming close to our wooden fence, I saw a group of our neighbours congregate at the dead end of the street. They appeared to be questioning Mr Hašek.

“Seriously, don’t tell us that you can’t remember where you’ve found these boletes?” I heard Mr Frankenstein grumble.

The surname suited well the stocky man who looked like a miniature version of the famous monster. Mr Frankenstein had a crooked back and a glass eye. His head rested on a disproportionately small body.

“I swear to God, I don’t have the slightest idea how these mushrooms got inside my shirt.” Mr Hašek shook his head in innocent denial. “I must have probably picked them somewhere in the forest.”

“Mushrooms!” Mr Caesar spat on the ground. “We know this old song.” The bald footballer was infamous with local children for his impersonation of the Devil during St. Mikuláš Night. “Your memory can’t be this bad.” He rumbled. “Come on. Spill out the beans, buddy.”

“We’re your friends. Why don’t you try to concentrate a little?” Mr Thunder was the tallest of the group and had a tendency to act as a peacemaker. “Do you need a glass of schnapps or something?”

“I swear to God.” Mr Hašek insisted. “My dog would know where I’ve found those mushrooms, but he can’t speak.”

None of our neighbours believed him.

“Stop pulling our leg.” Mr Frankenstein sounded angry. “You don’t want to tell us, because you’re selfish. You prefer to keep your hunting secrets for yourself.”

The four men were so busy arguing, they didn’t see my father walk over to them.

“*Čest práci*, comrades.” He mockingly addressed them with the working class greeting, honour to work! “Are you holding a street conference? Can I suggest that you grab your baskets instead of talking conspiracy theories? The forest is full of boletes like in the old good times.”

My dad’s strong presence made our neighbours automatically shrink. Only Mr Caesar stood his ground.

“*Nazdar* Jirka.” He firmly shook his hand, eyeing the bundle on Dad’s shoulder. “Have you found these in our wood? I thought that the mushrooming season was over.”

“Mate, I sure as hell didn’t smuggle them across the West German border.” Dad made everyone laugh.

A familiar screeching of the garden gate informed me that our other gossipy neighbour was raking his way up to us. “Gogo Venice!” Mr Šimek dropped his tool when he saw our harvest. “Vergel hog yo tick-tack hobo lettuce?”

“He wants to know where we picked so many boletes.” I translated.

“Oh really?”

Judging by Marta’s sullen expression, she was of the opinion that we should keep our hunting secret to ourselves.

“You are lucky that I have a heart of gold.” I often heard my father complain that our neighbours wouldn’t poke him with a stick if they found him lying dead in the gutter. “You know me. Don’t you?” A cheeky smile played around Dad’s lips as he challenged the insincere men to suck up to him.

“Yes, we do, we do.” The neighbours eagerly nodded. “Tell us. Tell us.”

“Alright then.” Dad exchanged looks with my mother and smiled. “Go to the top of Bobovka, past the clearing. Do you know that shallow crater that regularly gets hit with thunderbolts?”

“That’s right. Now I can remember!” Mr Hašek slapped his forehead, but none of the other neighbours bought into his act.

“Thanks. You’re a good bloke, Jirka!” They rushed home, jingling the keys.

By the time we unlocked our front door, the whole street came running to the forest. Everyone carried baskets. Mr Caesar even turned up with a wicker hamper on his back. Behaving with unprecedented friendliness, our neighbours flashed us smiles. I could see sparks of genuine gratitude in their eyes. There were suddenly enough mushrooms for everyone. It was easy to be generous.

“Throw everything in the sink!” My mother instructed us to carry our harvest to the kitchen. “Let’s clean up the boletes. We can pickle the small ones and cut up the rest in slices.”

I ran up to the attic to spread sheets of old newspaper on the floor. Marta’s job was to retrieve empty jars from the cellar and wash them. Dad was in charge of sharpening the knives.

“Let me do the chopping!” He was grinning like Mack the Knife when I handed him the cutting board.

“Wow.” I watched him slice the boletes with the speed and precision of a machine. “Where did you learn to use the knife, Dad?”

“I worked as a taxi driver.” He winked at me. “Remember?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t worry. Your father is only joking.” My mother giggled. “Listen Trumpet, why don’t you bring me a bottle of vinegar from the pantry?”

We sterilised the jars in the boiling water and filled them with boletes, adding a stock made of white vinegar, sugar, bay leaves, allspice and peppercorns. It took us hours to seal all the glasses. By the time we covered the attic floor with mushroom slices, it got dark

outside.

“Can you set the table for dinner, Trumpet?” Mum wiped her hands in the apron. “I’m going to prepare *Smaženice* now.”

“I’m hungry like a wolf!” Dad howled. “I think the occasion calls for a toast.”

I saw him run up to the garage. A moment later, he returned with a large test tube containing our homemade gin. This was another of Dad’s illegal activities. He used the Aparatura’s distillation column to turn cheap industrial alcohol into pure spirit. To make rum, my mum added caramel into Dad’s booze. She used juniper berries to make gin. Nobody could tell her drinks apart from the local industrial products, but she invariably worried about getting caught.

“Couldn’t you put the gin into an original bottle to make it look like we’ve bought it, Jirka?” She fretted.

“Come on, Aličko. Why don’t you relax?” Dad poured the aromatic drink into three glasses.

I lit up three candles on a rococo candleholder that featured a Pierrot playing a lute. Arranging the silver cutlery on the embroidered tablecloth, I pulled out the onion-pattern plates from my great grandmother’s cherry wood cupboard. These were the reminders of Mum’s rich communist past along with a set of hand-cut crystal glasses and the porcelain saltshaker shaped as a peasant girl harnessing a dog into a cart.

“Careful, Trumpet.” Mum called out from the kitchen when she heard the sound of chinking porcelain. “My grandmother gave me the onion-pattern dishes for my fifteenth birthday.”

“No worries, Mum.” I folded up four starched napkins like a professional waitress. “I know what I’m doing.”

The Red Countess might have been a terrible mother, but my great-grandmother was apparently a good soul. Mum attached a special meaning to every small object she had inherited from her Grandma, as if the Meissen plates symbolized the fragile family ties, reminding her of how easily and irreversibly they can break down.

“Didn’t you do a good job?” Dad happily overlooked the table. “We’re ready for the mushroom banquet.”

“Take as much as you want.” Mum came in with a frying pan full of *smaženice* and encouraged us to load our plates. “There’s more.”

Marta brought a basket with slices of cumin bread and we sat down around the table,

relishing the rich smell of fried mushrooms and English bacon.

“Cheers.” Dad ceremoniously lifted his glass. “We shall drink to our happiness. I toast the times that will bring us freedom. Let’s celebrate the impending and inevitable fall of the Soviet Empire!”

“*Na zdрави.*” My mother brought her glass to his.

The crystal chinked and the smell of juniper hit my nose.

“Let’s drink to love.” Marta sipped her gin.

“What do I get?” I disappointedly watched the adults.

“Mushrooms with vinegar!” My sister made a long nose at me.

“Why don’t you toast us with your glass of milk, Trumpet?” Mum suggested.

I did as she said.

“*Na zdрави.*” I proposed. “Good appetite.”

“*Dobrou chut’.*” Everyone echoed.

I spread a spoonful of *Smaženice* onto a slice of dark bread and took a bite when a foul taste struck my palate.

“Yuck!” I spat the mushrooms out.

“What did you put into it, Mum?” Marta skewed her face. “It tastes like bile.”

“I don’t believe it, Alice!” Dad froze in horror. “Oh no! Are these what I suspect they are?”

Taking a breath to preserve her dignity, Mum discretely emptied the contents of her mouth into a napkin. “I’m afraid that we’ve made a mistake.” She sighed. “These aren’t satin boletes, but satans.”

“*Ježišmarja.*” We looked at each other. “Why didn’t we realise this before?”

What Mum colloquially referred to as satans are the only exception to the rule that all velvet mushrooms are edible. Satans taste so bitter that even slugs and snails won’t touch them, which is why they tend to grow in big clusters. But apart from the unblemished appearance, they don’t display any characteristic signs that would set them apart from the satin boletes. Like anything involving the Devil, the only clue that gives satans away is that they actually look too good to be true.

“So there we go. Let’s throw everything in the garbage bin.” Dad wearily took off his glasses to rub the root of his nose. “Now I really hope this isn’t a sign from God.”

“Come on, Dad.” Marta objected. “God doesn’t exist.”

“Yes he does!” I cried. “But so does Satan.”

My mother wrapped her arms around Dad's neck. "There's no point in getting upset, Jirka." She attempted to cheer him up. "I'll cook scrambled eggs for dinner."

"What a terrible waste of time and effort!" My father bitterly grumbled. "I was really looking forward to eating *smaženice*. It's my favourite meal of all times."

We ended up throwing our dinner into a plastic bag. Marta and I collected the slices of bitter boletes from the attic and Mum and Dad emptied the jars with pickled satans in the sink. To dispose of the Devil's mushrooms, we carried the whole harvest to the trashcan outside our garage.

"*Dobry večer*, Mr Šimek." I greeted a shadow lurking on the opposite side of our street.

"It's too bad about those satans, huh?" Dad uncomfortably addressed our neighbour. "What a bummer! It looks like Mother Nature played a joke on us."

"Donce, mustard Urn." Mr Šimek's voice sounded grumpy. "Yo half owl most possum muffin." The shadow slammed the rusty gate and stomped up the garden stairs.

"What did he say?" Marta was baffled.

"He seems to blame me for poisoning his family." Dad incredulously shook his head. "This is at least what I understood."

The cold night air made me shiver. I could sense unfriendly vibes coming from down the street. Turning around, I noticed our neighbours' silhouettes congregating in front of Mr Acorn's fence. The street lantern buzzed above their heads with swarms of moths flying around in circles.

"Don't pay any attention to them." Dad protectively wrapped his arm around my shoulders. "They're just a bunch of ungrateful critters."



THE FRIENDLY ATMOSPHERE OF the late afternoon was gone. Once again, our neighbours became hostile and embittered, similar to the satans we ended up throwing in the garbage bin. Life was back to normal as we returned down to our living room. My father switched on the Voice of America and poured himself another beer.

"*Grrrr . . . the Communist propaganda . . . yuiii . . . hypocrisy of the regime . . . grrrr . . . threatens to destroy . . . yuiii . . . the Cold War is far from ending . . . grrrr . . .*"

“Jirka, can you please switch off the radio during dinner?” Mum yelled out from the kitchen.

“What was that?” Dad pulled a Sparta from his pocket. “I can’t hear you.”

As soon as he brought his lighter to the tip of the fag, I could see that it was the one stuffed with goat’s hair. It started to smoulder like a slow burning fuse, filling my father’s nose with a thick black smoke.

“What’s this shit!” He jumped up.

“That’s disgusting.” Marta fanned herself with a napkin as if she was about to faint. “Seriously, you should quit smoking, Dad.”

“Bloody hell!” I saw my father crush the spiked Sparta in the fireplace. “It stinks like burned hair.” He suspiciously examined the cigarette butt.

I made myself small behind the table, looking at my feet.

“This was your work, little Trumpet.” He saw right through me. “Don’t try to act innocent. I swear to God,” he coughed, “if you do this to me again, I’ll throw you over Hašek’s fence and feed you to his dog.”

I had little to worry about even if Dad was angry. He never laid his hands on me.

“Hector is actually my friend and Mr Hasek never remembers anything.” I said.

The mention of our neighbour’s forgetfulness must have made Dad think of something funny, because he suddenly stopped grumbling and began to laugh.

“Speaking of Ha . . . ha . . . ha . . . šek.” He snorted, stammering like Mr Šimek. “I . . . I . . . just ha-ha-had a hi-hi-hi-larious vi-hi-hi-hi-sion . . .”

“What’s going on?” Marta was curious.

“If he . . . he . . . he . . . ended up . . . eating his . . . his . . . his . . . *sma-ba-ba-ba-ženice*.” I could see tears in my father’s eyes. He was laughing so hard now he couldn’t utter an intelligible word.

It wasn’t until my mother brought our improvised dinner to the table that Dad was in shape to share his vision with us. Taking a gulp of his Pilsner Urquell, he sat down to eat scrambled eggs.

“Try to imagine Mr Hašek when he finds out that his *smaženice* is made of satans.” He gasped with laughter. “He spits it out like we did and gets up to throw his dinner in the trashcan. Having no memory, however, he forgets that his mushrooms taste bitter as he walks across his front yard. The boletes with bacon smell delicious and he can’t help wondering why on earth he was going to dispose of them.”

I could see the trail of Dad's thoughts. He had us all laughing. I pictured Mr Hašek returning to his dining table to finish his dinner.

“Once again, he is genuinely upset to discover that his *smaženice* tastes like bile.” Dad continued. “He heads back outside with the intention to throw the satans out, when his memory fails him again.”

My father was a natural actor. I rolled with laughter when he imitated our forgetful neighbour returning to his house to eat yet another bitter mouthful. Repeatedly, the old gossip would go back and forth from the trashcan to the table, making the same tragic mistake until there was nothing left on his plate.

Black humour is the best way our nation copes with hardship. Over the centuries, we refined it to perfection. The thought of our gossipy neighbour polishing off a plateful of satans was entirely malicious, but irresistibly funny. Even Mum, who was our arbiter of appropriate behaviour and good morals, laughed herself to tears.

“So what is the moral of the story?” She wiped her eyes with a napkin.

“Mushrooms with vinegar!” I hiccupped.

We laughed and laughed, washing the bitter taste from our palates with laughter.

And so it goes in life, which is filled with disappointments. Most of our dreams are too good to come true. The Devil always hides beneath the shiny veneer of perfection and he never gives up on projecting false hope. Perhaps this is the law of the Universe and it will never change. Still, instead of feeling sorry for ourselves and becoming cynical and pessimistic, we preferred to laugh at the irony of things, adding a grain of sugar to the bittersweet comedy of life.

