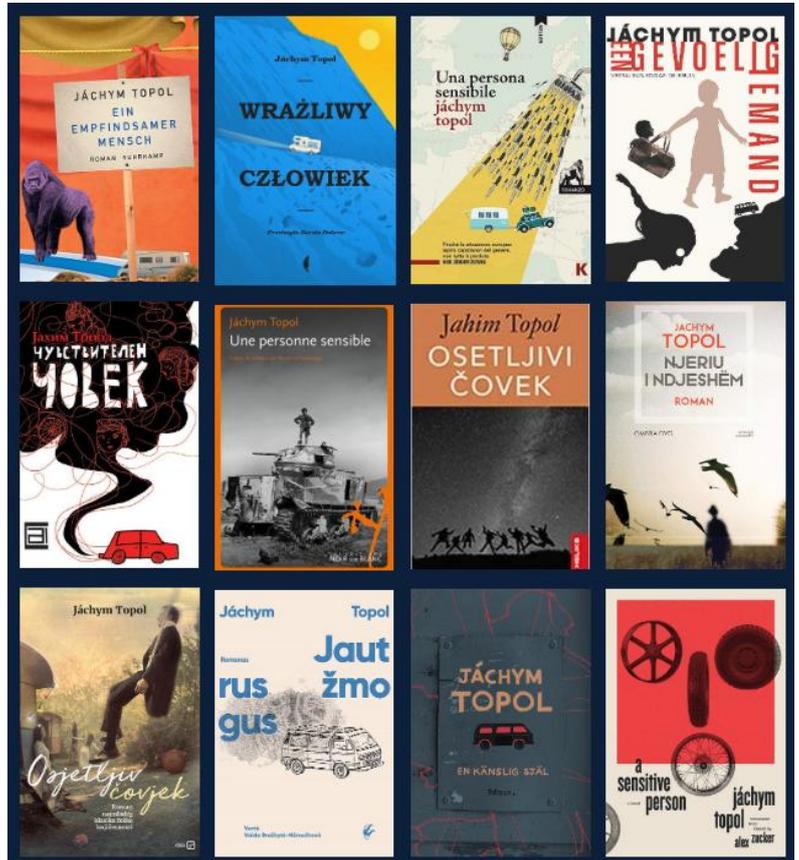


A SENSITIVE PERSON, Jáchym Topol

Proposal with plot, synopsis and 3 chapters in English

Czechia ([Torst](#))
USA ([Yale University Press](#))
Germany ([Suhrkamp](#))
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“A picaresque romp of black humour and fantasy, the novel teems with extraordinary characters, but it is also urgently contemporary.”

— *The Times Literary Supplement*

“Tossed at a diabolically rapid pace between Czech social reality and Topol’s boundless imagination, his political discourse and picaresque escapades, a highly poetic language and a constant recourse to slang from the slums, a chilling pessimism and contagious hilarity, savage violence and an all-consuming tenderness, the reader in turn ends up losing his footing in this elusive Central Europe.”

— *Libération*

“Topol has drawn with incorruptible eyes the interpersonal and historical devastation of a great Bohemian family portrait yet has remained unswerving in his optimism and his philanthropy.”

— *Frankfurter Allgemeine*

In short

It's 2015, and Europe is characterized by populism, xenophobia and, not least, Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Picaresque and at times brutal, *A Sensitive Soul* is a dark entertaining carnivalesque that depicts those trying to find their place in a society they no longer belong to. At a breakneck pace, transgressing taboos, Topol tackles the major themes of our time: religion, family, daily survival, love, friendship, politics and death. Raw-skinned, with sensitive souls.

Mour, an aging actor, his wife Soňa, and their two sons travel across Europe touring from one theatre festival to another, from one trouble to another. Performing at the Shakespeare Festival in Great Britain they are chased out of the country by Brexit supporters (LEAVE MEANS LEAVE! NO CZECH VERMIN!). In their camper van, and after numerous adventures, the family settles on the banks of the Sázava River, southeast of Prague, where they find a country completely different from the one they remember.

Mour is then accused of murdering his father-in-law. He evades justice and embarks on a road trip through the region with his two sons. On foot, by car, and by boat, they meet all sorts of characters: vagabonds, prostitutes, petty criminals, pawnbrokers, drunks, thugs and hooligans—people who live by their own rules, their primary goal being survival. They are brutal, yet deeply sensitive; they are simple, yet philosophical. They must change because their world is fading away, and the new one is governed by entirely different rules. The journey culminates in a grand finale involving a wedding, a brothel, the Czech police, and a Russian tank. Welcome to the Far East!

This highly contemporary novel where everyone lives according to their own rules alternates between grotesque scenes, poetic descriptions, and witty, lively dialogue.

Topol is undoubtedly the most prominent author in post-communist Czechia, who with his unique expression and genre-crossing novels about societal change and the inevitability of history has carved out a place for himself in contemporary European literature, winning numerous awards and being translated into a number of languages.

“A Sensitive Person is grotesque and meditative, kind and gloomy, full of irony, sadness and black humour, forming a dazzling geyser in which more and less believable stories alternate in a diabolical rhythm.”

— **MF Dnes**

“Une personne sensible est un roman généreux, jubilatoire et désespéré, dans lequel voisinent tragédie et burlesque.”

— **Le Temps**

“At times the novel morphs into absurdist theater. The narrative mimics stage directions, and the characters' conversations create this world. The stage is a Europe filled with anxieties about its future, but also with constant questions about the past.”

— **Rzeczpospolita**

Long Synopsis

***Citlivý člověk* by Jáchym Topol**

Book title (original): Citlivý člověk

Book title (translated): A Sensitive Man

Publisher: Torst, Prague

Year of publishing: 2017

Number of pages: 360

Welcome to the Wild East! In this most contemporary novel, Topol portrays a picture of life in the Czech countryside. Do not let this dissuade you, however, as it is not a slow meandering rural novel, but rather has its own dynamic and rhythm. Full speed grotesque episodes alternate with both witty and vivid dialogues; poetical descriptions contrast with the vulgar, explicit speech of the protagonists. It is a story about ordinary people, about clans, hookers, loan sharks, gypsies, hoodlums. People in small towns who are used to live by their own rules. Their life is one of wheeling and dealing and they do not feel inhibited by any political correctness. It is also a community that changes, because the world is changing. Topol ticks all the boxes: love and death, religion, family, friendship, survival, modern politics, the Russian threat, Europe and populism. The novel reflects European society of today; the characters in Topol's novel are rough people, brutal, but with a heart, sensitive.

The story

A family is travelling around Europe to perform at theatre festivals, mostly Shakespearian ones. They live like travelers. There is the elderly father— later in the book referred to by his nickname Moor – the much younger, alcoholic mother Sonja and two boys. Though the boys are twins about in the age of 12 or 14, one of them looks to still be an infant. Occasionally the story shifts to the normal-looking boy and here we can see some resemblance with the heroes from some of Topol's previous books, like *Nightwork* and *Gargling With Tar*. However, the boy does not speak at all, with the exception of the final line of the story.

While travelling Europe to earn money at festivals they are confronted by the changes in Europe, resulting in a growing resentment towards foreigners. They are chased away from a site in Bristol (“LEAVE MEANS LEAVE! POLISH VERMIN!”) and on the continent, in Spain and France, they encounter similar problems: they are not welcome anymore. They end up at a large train station in Budapest, which is overcrowded with refugees. There they bump into Moor's older brother Ivan appears – Ivan left for Russia with their father a long time ago. They leave with Ivan, who seems to be something like a Russian general now, and fly off to a place called Ajvaristan in Ukraine. There they get caught in civic war. Moor takes his wife and kids and drive off home.

Home is the region on the banks of the river Sázava, southeast of Prague and after been away for twenty odd years they want to settle down and head for the house of Sonja's father, who is lying on his deathbed. Sonja collapses – she is pregnant and has a miscarriage – and is brought to a hospital, while Moor gets arrested on suspicion of murdering Sonja's father, who died. Moor manages to escape the police and finds refuge at the estate of Bašta. Bašta is the, old school, head of the largest clan around Sázava, a loan shark and boss of a scrap yard.

Here we meet several other characters who will play an important role in the story. Richie, a jack of all trades; Pájka (Willy Welder), a mechanical genius and more importantly the two sons of Bašta, Miran and Kája, both very big and strong fellows, who work in the auto workshop of their father and act as enforcers collecting loans. Moor wants to drop in at his mother, so Miran and Kája take him and his kids in a car to her house.

From here on the story splits into two separate narrative lines. In alternating chapters we follow Moor and his kids on a sort of road trip, running into various people and events, while Moor tries to go to the hospital where his wife is located. He travels by car, on foot, by boat, by motorcycle and encounter a series of locals, have all kind of adventures (he gets into fights with the local motor gang, finds an iconic painting, assists more than once in someones suicide etcetera).

The other storyline is about the brothers Miran and Kája, who are going about doing their business, collecting loans. Central in their story is the preparation of a special present for their father's birthday and the upcoming wedding of Kája with a girl named Svetlana. Both, the wedding and the birthday, are to be celebrated in a few days' time in the brothel where Svetlana works. Monika, Moor's sister, is the brothel madam. During one of their visits to 'customer' they run into Ivan, Moor's brother, who returned to the Czech Republic to buy as much property as he can, especially from the the Bašta clan to establish a New Russia, like the Donbas in the Ukraine. (later it turns out Ivan killed old Bašta). At one of their last stops at someone who owes them money, Miran is shot and killed.

They all come together again at the end of the book at the brothel. The wedding is put off because of Miran's death. The police is around to arrest Moor. Moor also learns that his wife Olga has died. Then the ground trembles and a roaring sound is heard. Down the road arrives a Russian tank. This was the present for old Bašta, who is dead by now. A lot many of his Bašta's old friends also found their end the last few days (which is quite a significant feature in the book and bears a special meaning). The tank itself lied on the bottom of the river. Richie and Willy Welder hoisted it from the water and made it work again.

Mayhem around as the tank thunders down the road, rams through the police cordon, crushes police cars. Willy maneuvers the tank in front of the driveway up to the brothel and points the turret at the brothel. The grenade hits the brothel and next moment it is raining cakes, glasses, bras and sexy underwear.

And so the story ends in a big bang. Not entirely, because the last scene is for Moor, his sister Monika and the boy. They drove off on the motorbike and have now stopped. Moor unhinges the sidecar and Monika says she's

leaving Sázava to try her luck somewhere else. Moor mounts the bike and asks the boy if he would like to jump on. 'Okay' he answers.

The book contains a fair amount of dialogues, as usual one of Topol's strong suits, and they play a crucial role in the story, because through these dialogues we learn a lot about the motives of the various characters, their history, opinions etc. There is talk about religion, life, love and death, the existence of God, euthanasia, the changes in life, but also topical items like the threat of Russia, new (populistic) politics and the shooting down of flight MH 17 above Ukraine. The conversations are vivid and natural, and often very funny. The speakers are always making sure to have a bottle close at hand. They are not alcoholics: drinking alcohol is a part of life, it is as common for them as eating bread. But despite how light and funny it all may appear, underneath it is dead serious.

Next to the spoken words are the poetic descriptions of the landscape and atmosphere or elaborations on the history of Sázava, on the visible changes, the inhabitants, the progressing of modern life, politics etc.

Topol offers a wide variety of themes with this book and it is not easy to find one common denominator, there is probably more than one. Of course one is tempted to look for parallels with Topol's previous work. And there are some, such as a strong motif of survival. And the theme of two young brothers – one taking care of the other, with love, but sometimes regarded as a burden – is not new, but here in *A Sensitive Man* it gets an extra dimension, because the boy doesn't speak. And the brother theme is extended by Moor and Ivan, and Miran and Kája. In terms of family Topol for the first time has chosen the father as the main protagonist, while the boy is merely occasionally given room for some observations (interior monologue).

Because of the contemporary character of the novel one can try to look at *City Sister Silver*, Topol's grand novel on the direct aftermath of the Velvet Revolution of 1989. But such comparison fails straight on one cardinal point: with *A Sensitive Man* Topol maintains a much firmer grip on the story; it is told in a much more coherent way. However if we would give the comparison a bit of thought, one could say that *City Sister Silver* stood for the beginning of a new era, while *A Sensitive Man* marks more the end of it (though both picture an uncertain future). So it seems the cycle is been completed. It is no coincidence that all the oldies, Bašta and his companions all die in the book. Some of them voluntarily, others by the hand of another person. But with none of them it is a real tragedy. Their time has simply come. In that sense the death of Miran and Olga are more tragic, though Miran was still old school, while Kája already knew his future with Svetlana would not lie in Sázava and in the work he had be doing.

And maybe that is what it is: a farewell to a certain period of life and a world that is definitely changing. Even a rather authentic and autonomous functioning region, like Sázava, can not longer resist the outside world. Whether this outside world is invading in the person of developers, commercial enterprises or in Ivan, who comes round wanting to transform Sázava into New Russia.

Finally, let's not forget the book is also grotesque, best illustrated by the big bang ending of the story. Several situations and especially the dialogues are at times very funny. So, it is by no means a somber, depressing book. Under this surface of grotesque and humour, the book carries a serious undertone, as argued here above. And if one wants to look for some comparison with other books, perhaps *Suttree* by Cormac McCarthy comes closest.

The title refers in the first place to the boy, but actually one could label the father, Moor, with it as well. One could even argue that despite all their toughness, people like Richie, Bašta, Napalm, Willy Welder and the others are deep down gentle giants. All characters – perhaps with the exception of Ivan - evoke a certain sympathy: they are all sensitive men.

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A Sensitive Person

YUP -- NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

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1

BRISTOL GLOBE. WHY HE ADDRESSES BOTH. NIGHT
FLIGHT. SOŇA IN THE MORNING. THE NOTEBOOK.
THE TATTOOED BOY. CAMP ON FIRE. PISS OFF!
ELEANOR AND HER BOYS. AND ONWARD.

How the hell am I sposta concentrate here?!

Papa squats behind the wheel of their nomadmobile, bottle in reach, notebook open on his knees, scribbling away.

Almost finished writin a chapter last night, but what with all the comotion, I only got down an outline! And here Bristol always used to be so nice! *Treasure Island*, boys! Ever hear of cabin boy Jimmy Hawkins? He addresses both his boys, because, as he puts it, he wants to get them talking. The one in baby rompers as well as the one that's grown.

You know what's interesting, though? he says, turning to Soňa, who's heating a spoon over one of the flames on the portable stove. On the other, she gives an occasional stir to the little nipper's porridge.

Now I identify more with Long John Silver!

That just comes with middle age, says Soňa. She continues her morning ritual, rolling up the sleeve on her flamboyantly colored mandala shirt.

Papa's tattered notebook, covered with coffee and wine stains, goes sailing over the stillsleeping little boy and lands amid the piles of junk.

He stretches out his legs and settles his head back against the headrest, taking in the other nomads stationed around them. On his body, a grimy T-shirt and shorts; in his eyes, a relentless shine of curiosity. On the histrion's head, a crocheted hippie hat, his ginger hair, with tufts of gray, sticking out from underneath.

His gaze lands on the gated entrance to the campsite, a minute replica of the Globe Theatre, covered with light bulbs that flare to life only at night to form the numeral 400, a rather comical portrait of the play-

wright himself, and the legend HIS WORDS: WISDOM, FREEDOM, AND BEAUTY!

Due to the nighttime arrivals, there is an unusual amount of activity swirling around the site of the traditional festival, this year dedicated to the life and work of William Shakespeare. It was here, years ago, that Papa and Soňa marked the anniversary of the Czech Republic's accession to the Community with an ingenious performance, dancing their way to a splendid three hundred and thirteen pounds. Now, however, everything is different.

Papa stares, gapes, deliberates. Sniffs the wind, taking his bearings by the movements of his beak. There was a time when he considered having his nose lined with a thin coating of precious metal. But he wasn't *that* successful.

An urgently summoned team of immigration officials are stationed at the entrance gate, their desks, computers, and forms stacked with donuts, plates of pastries, cups of java.

The grounds were empty yesterday. Now, though, the site is strewn with people arranged in groups. Rows of sleepers on mats, women in long frocks with babies, little clusters here and there sitting and gesticulating. Old women with plastic containers plod to the water hookup, with adolescents hanging around, in tattered T-shirts and jeans, surveying the women as if they were overseeing their work.

Police cars sit on the edges of the crowd, whose largely black garb gives them the appearance of a solid mass. Most of the nighttime arrivals stumbled in and bedded down right on the spot, assaulted throughout the night by waves of insecurity and fear.

Man, do I love Bristol! Though we never did get a peek at the port. Maybe we can get down there today, what do you think? Papa hollers at the boy as he shuffles off to fill their containers.

The line for the hydrants extends past the gate. Could be the hose burst, or maybe someone damaged one of the water sources. Moving single file, the dark, veiled women inch forward, tramping through the mud with their barrels and bags of refillable bottles. Water squishes up around the boy's tennis shoes.

Hey you . . . The boy raises his head. A smiling young woman with

a mane of blonde hair cascading over her shoulders hands him a chocolate-frosted donut out the window of the illuminated Globe replica.

He stretches up on his tiptoes, feels the jelly drip down his fingers, but just then somebody slugs him in the shoulder. Two dark, gangly boys. The taller one, with sleepy eyelids, grabs the donut and wolfs it down.

He, I . . . The young lady leans out and hands over the whole box of treats, the sun beating down on their multicolored icing.

A scuffle breaks out, sending the boy scurrying away. Suddenly he's lost in a sea of pants and T-shirts and blow-dealing elbows, reeling like a puppy tossed by its heartless master into the midst of a Doberman fight.

Peering through the advancing line of skirts, women's flats, sneakers, and sandals, the boy catches a glimpse of the overturned canisters and edges toward the women, who dodge him with furious screams, like he was a stinging insect. To his amazement, he discovers he's holding a box against his belly with the donuts squished into the corners: he won.

The boy holds the spoils close, now suddenly amid the sleepy crowd. Someone, still half buried in their sleeping bag, takes a swing at him, he jumps out of the way.

And finds himself staring straight into the face of a naked boy. Roughly the same age and height as him. His hard little face not only grubby but also thoroughly black. His cheeks, arms, and thighs are tattooed, strewn with inflamed needle pricks. The crowd streams past, giving them a long look. It's a long way to the fortress on wheels, where his parents are. He hands the boy the box. Turns around and picks up one of the plastic containers, claws the other one from underneath somebody's feet, waits his turn in line, then sticks the hose in them and fills them to the brim. The way he's always done.

The evening performance in Bristol is canceled under the clause covering unexpected events, catastrophes, and natural disasters (plus sixty-two pounds for Papa and Soña).

Well, we wanted to blow this rainsville and head south anyway!

They fall in with the caravan of other cars and spend the day traveling on to a new campsite.

After the trip, Soňa and the boys are exhausted, so they get ready for bed right away. They don't even bother with setting up a tent, instead just cuddling up in the back of the camper.

Soňa cradles the little nipper in her arms, whispering in his ear. As the boy falls asleep, he catches a glimpse of his papa in the front seat, scratching away in his notebook with his chin thrust forward.

That night, someone sets the pikeys' camp on fire. The assailants hurl a Molotov cocktail into a tent, while another group ignites the wooden watchman's hut. As the caravan crews dash about, trying to extinguish the flames, the occupants of the camp rapidly pack their things. Papa urges the family to stay calm.

They intentionally threw it in a tent where nobody was. They know what they're doin, they're not tryin to hurt anyone.

They sure do want us outta here though!

Can you blame em?

All right, let's move it, we're goin too! says Soňa with her one seeing eye still glued shut and in an alarming state of disarray.

Papa objects that he really wants to finish writing his chapter. But maybe instead I should turn it into a play, he mutters. Just then some pebbles fly into the windshield. Cast from a distance, they land without force, drumming like raindrops.

Goddammitall! Papa shouts, flinging his notebook into the back, where it lands on a heap of other unfinished work.

LEAVE MEANS LEAVE! POLISH VERMIN!

A group of angry women and a few scowling older men hold up a homemade banner bearing those words, as well as a few others.

At the head of the procession, pouring out of the street toward the devastated campsite, swarms a pack of boys.

Leading the way is a severe-looking man, dressed in black, with a megaphone at his mouth. He chants the slogan at the top of his lungs from under a pencil-thin mustache, waving a black umbrella to conduct the passion-swollen chorus behind him.

They look like they just walked out of a Beatles video, don't they? Papa says to Soňa.

A toddler nails one of their fenders with a piece of brick. The others howl with pleasure.

Eleanor Rigby, that's it!

Another lad wings a brick at the caravan, but it falls short.
We're not Polish vermin, we're *Czech* vermin! Papa yells out the window. We fought for you! Battle of Britain! Ever hear of that, lady? he screams at a woman in the fast-approaching swarm.

You were definitely born by then, you old cow!

Take it easy!

You heifer!

He starts the engine. Soňa takes the boy's hand. With her other she points to a street of postcard-perfect redbrick homes jammed with local inhabitants heading in their direction. Men and boys in T-shirts and jeans stomp across the trampled lawns, baseball bats in hand.

The fastest of the bunch, an elegant-looking fellow with colorfully tattooed arms, in a T-shirt with stripes slicing the suspenders holding up his shorts, spits on the hood and proceeds to step around to the vehicle's rear.

I think we better go, says Papa. And they go.

2

TRAVELERS—NO HOLIDAYS! EXASPERATED
OFFICER. MEMORY OF SLOVAKIA, MEMORY OF
LOVE. ABOUT THE LEG. ABOUT ADDICTION.
ON THE BRIDGE. UNDER THE BRIDGE:
A SYMPHONY OF THE UNIVERSE.

Leaving England, they zip down through France, a day here, a day there, a little *dégustation* in the South. Papa's got his sights set on the calendar of events.

But on reaching the old campgrounds in Spain, they find the hookups all torn out or filled in with concrete, signs substituting vehemence for grammar, like TRAVELERS, LEAVE! WE HAVE NO HOLIDAYS! and calls for them to bugger off, spraypainted on the boulders and concrete walls around the designated sites.

In the hamlet of Peñascos, a traditional hippie meeting place, a citizens' militia stands at the alert, equipped with a water cannon and a banner reading NO! THANK YOU, ADIOS!, while just down the road from the old Travelers' site outside Toledo is a huge refugee camp, spilling into the city, where there are increasing numbers of demonstrations and clashes with the police, so the KOBKA festival, in honor of Edgar Allan Poe, is called off (minus three hundred forty-seven euros for both of them), and it's the same story in the market town of San Guzmán, where there's no interest in performances that summer (minus two hundred fifty euros for her, minus three hundred fifty euros for him, minus fifteen euros for the boys, who would've shined as Pucks, especially with the little guy suspended above the stage from a rope). And on it goes.

They cross back into France, where at a campground in one of many darkening twilights they are surprised by a wall of caravans and silent mustachioed men, mostly garbed in prehistoric nylon suits, some with red sashes stretched across their paunches. The women—squalling

moppets clinging to their colorful flowing skirts, hair, arms, and fists covered in silver jewels and other trinkets—are not exactly what you would call quiet.

Hey, they pinched our spot, Papa splutters amid the general ruckus and screeching.

But before they can confront the usurpers, they are stopped by gendarmes with machine guns over their shoulders.

Papa takes the bottle he was just about to swig from and deftly tucks it under his legs.

A tall, somber-faced man in an officer's cap steps up to the window. We should turn around and beat it. Fast.

No way! The boys're tired! Tell that bull we've been pitchin our tent here for a thousand years, for God's sake.

But clearly the gendarme doesn't like his tone.

He steps around the hood, his fierce gaze piercing Papa's pupils, which are roiling with a passion of equal ferocity.

He says that according to new regulations, the camp's only for French citizens. You gotta show your carte du nomade.

Mon capitaine, you must be shittin me, man! Papa yawps. What card? Do we look like gypsies? Mon colonel, noo nuh sum pa lay ciganes, we are Czechs! Noo sum bohèmes de la Bohême!

He says the best pension for foreigners is Au Trois Couilles de l'Empereur Napoléon Bonaparte, three kilometers from here.

And who's gonna pay for it, sonuvabitch! That Funès is out of his mind! Tell him that!

No!

Show him the children! Boys, slide over!

The cop takes a look at the desperately smiling Soňa and the terrified boy, pulls his gun from his holster, and presses it to Papa's throat.

Papa just stares straight ahead, feverishly licking the drops of sweat beading on his upper lip.

The officer's voice is soft and insistent.

He says he's very tired. He says this convoy from Romania is the fourth one already today. He says he hates Hitler, but he feels the need to remind you. He says we have no business being here. He also says you shouldn't make fun of him.

Fine, fine, grumbles Papa. Exkoozay mwa, muhsyuh, pardon mwa,

he rasps now to the cop's back as he turns the van around. He says nothing even as they careen back down the shabby road in a cloud of dust, and he says nothing even as they hit asphalt again, passing a few familiar landmarks—it's not their first time through this dry and dusty landscape—and in the distance now he sees the bend of a river, there used to be a couple spots around here in the old days, some campgrounds where they stayed before they had the boys, and then with them too, that's right! The two of them know the area well, it's etched into their memories—and the boys? well, now it'll be stuck in their minds too.

You sure you don't want a sip? This stuff is precious, amontillado, seriously!

Don't drink and drive, are you crazy? says Soña. She snatches the bottle out of his hand and glug glug glug.

Couple swigs of amontillado, nothin better for buildin bravado!

You can say that again, Soña replies, tipping the bottle down from her lips. Her face, alarmingly rumpled, begins to take on a calmer appearance, a state of bliss spreading through her capillaries. She adjusts the bandage on her leg, pulls it tighter.

Frogs got all serious, don't you think?

Ever since Bataclan.

Batawhat?

Don't tell me you didn't see it, it's all over the news. Oh, never mind . . .

What kina clan?

As she finishes explaining, he rummages around a box on the floor, searches through all his pockets, and finally pulls out two pink rectangles of hard shiny paper, waving them in Soña's face.

You see! We should've gone! I won these tickets from a friend of mine. He was practically bawlin, his favorite group was playin there, but a bet's a bet, what can you do?

Huh?

I was gonna invite you there for our anniversary, but I totally forgot! How many dead were there? Guess we got lucky, huh?

So you forgot our anniversary! Typical!

I'm sorry!

Mm-hmm!

I think I already asked, but where'd you learn all those languages anyway?

I just did.
I envy you. All we learned was Russian.
We won't be needin that.
You've got a Russian name, though. Doesn't that seem weird to you?
It's from my dad.
You're always dad this, dad that. What about your mom, though?
Soňa makes a sweeping gesture into the distance.
My name's hebish.
That's not how you say it.
Say what?
Biblical's better. Just say biblical.
Well, all right then! Hey, look . . .

They're coming up on the bridge now, its giant frame arching over the valley, the bridge they know from below. The two of them give each other a look, a dewy-eyed look from deep down inside, so deep that for a second of eternity you become that other person, though what's running through their minds right now is how they met. Back then in Slovakia.

He saw the girl again first thing in the morning. She stepped through the curtain of similarity enveloping the other participants of the theater festival and sat down beside him. He clapped his notebook shut, put away his pen, and stared.

Slim and gorgeous, colorful braids, her bosom practically sang.

To what do I owe this honor?

They were on fire. So they kissed. Meanwhile, a gentle breeze rolled down from the mountains enfolding the concrete and grassy surfaces of the Pohoda festival site, caressing and soothing their burning hearts.

You're such a man!

The early-morning guests seated around the table behind them burst into laughter, the one with the bone in his nose actually moaned, and another, a metrosexual covered in comics from head to toe, just hee-hawed and threw back his whole Mirinda in one gulp.

She smiled. A moment from the previous night stood out in her mind, when the stalwart conqueror, drained at last, came to rest in her tenderness-swollen palm, resting there like a satisfied, chubby little baby.

You really are an old fucker! You know, people say the generations are growin farther apart, but I like your generation.

Really? So what does your dad do?

We're from Benešov.

That performance of yours? Wow! You were the best!

So where'd you learn to act?

Art therapy—I was in treatment, he said, revealing the truth.

Yeah, you're really yourself up there. I also like that you're not tattooed.

I considered it, but I've got too much respect for prisoners.

He didn't elaborate. Among other things, on the landscapes of men in blue jumpsuits where sacks of acetone rustled and pederasts smacked their lips; the world behind bars, where the darkness of the soul is dense. Why scare the young lady away?

What?

They don't have that instinct for self-preservation.

I see. So where're you goin from here?

I don't exactly know yet.

I like that too.

Rumbling and jolting, Papa and Soňa vault out of their ardent recollection across the yellow-outlined speedbumps and onto the lengthy bridge. A structure seemingly spat out by a civilization from outer space! A steel edifice dozens of meters above the river! Arched vaults, filigree nuts and bolts, stones painstakingly carved to fit together precisely. Utter rapture.

Here under this very bridge, probably, who knows, she had given birth, about nine months after they met, give or take a week. Who could count all the individual moments in the rolling river of love and harmony that had surged from them in the beginning?

Beyond the parched landscape, the sea lies sparkling in the distance; beneath them, a French river, again soaking up the reflections of their souls, pulling them toward the bottom, down among the rocks, into the churning sludge.

She turns her attention away from the road, casts a glance at his jutting nose indicating the way. Peeks at the boys in back, the sleeping lit-

tle nipper sweetly displaying his cute little face, the other one gazing pensively out the window. And she feels so sad! And so marvelous!

Hey! Maybe the present moment really is all there is!

You promised you'd stop.

There's no heaven and hell, ever, anywhere, I swear.

And she launches right back into it.

Life is beautiful! Sad and beautiful! That's the only thing I know!

You don't care about me, fine, but for God's sake, think of the kids!

The present is all that exists, for real! I just realized it now!

Look, this is our last performance, then we go home, and unless you stop, I'm droppin you off at the clinic first thing. How's your leg? You said it had been hurting.

It's swollen!

What from?

I donno. Life.

Needles're dangerous, you know.

It is swollen a little, that's true.

Look, in any case it's best to be ailing in your mother tongue. We'll find you some fancy private clinic and your daddy can spring for it.

What do you say?

Like hell. What about the boys?

What about them? I'll take care of them.

Swear on the Mother of God.

Fine!

No, swear it, for real!

They come rumbling off the bridge, since he should have touched the brakes before going over the yellow but didn't, and go barreling down the asphalt road, past the bushes leaning out from the concrete-reinforced banks.

Hey, buckle up, all right? Where's your seat belt? If the cops pull us over, we got nothin to pay the fine with.

But then they decide to look back.

They were wandering lost in the dark. They could have sworn they knew the way to the nearest clinic, so they could go straight to the delivery room and get there in time, but things went awry.

He peered out the windows, trying to see the signs through the cords of rain, as she moaned, holding her hands atop her swollen belly. They must have missed the turnoff. All he could see was a red glow shining under the bridge.

He stopped and got out of the car. He would go and ask directions. With great effort, she wriggled out and tried to come along. He chased her back to the car, but she insisted. They probably both needed relief from that cramped space full of groans and cries. She was desperate for air. And besides, they had run out of gas.

He held her as they stumbled through the mud beneath the bridge's arch. The road was high overhead. Right away they came across a heap of paper boxes. She flopped down, unable to go on. At least she had cardboard under her back.

She stretched out and spread her legs, attempting to pull up her skirt. As he tore the rags from her trembling hips, her milk-filled breasts shook in time with her breathing. Rolling up his sweatshirt, he stuck it underneath her head, and good thing too.

The back of her skull slammed furiously into the pillow as she writhed in pain, her truly animal-like screams reflecting off the metal arch.

He tried not to blind her with the light from his headlamp. Besides, he didn't even want to see the look on her face as foam formed at the corners of her mouth. She continued to shriek in pain, her stomach bulging monstrously.

Papa kneeled at Soña's feet, aiming the cone of light at the expanding opening between her bloodied legs, where a tiny little head had appeared. He waited, prepared to grasp hold of the infant. The head emerged. Then popped gently out. As if someone had pressed down firmly on Soña's belly and squeezed out the contents. The newborn slipped out, softly plopping into his hands. He felt more than saw the umbilical cord. Using his finger, he untangled it from the coil of blood and mucus and sliced through it with his jackknife. He gaped in awe at the blood-covered child. It's a boy, he realized. He cleared the slime from its mouth using his little finger. Tried to wipe the little eyes, tiny as grains of lentil, and the child weakly mewled. Then burst into tears.

Probably that explains why he didn't hear the footsteps. Or the voices. It wasn't raining that hard anymore, but the little boy's cries drowned out the sound.

They came from somewhere on the other side, down below the bridge.

Soña lay on the boxes, legs bent at the knee. Though no longer at the peak of her pain, her face was still contorted in spasms.

They came walking up and surrounded them. Black men in jeans, windbreakers. One young man held up a lighter, another had a flashlight, pointing it at the little nipper in Papa's hands.

In a gesture of defenselessness and amazement, with an almost apologetic grin, he raised the child to show the newcomers. Blinking in the light. His baby son fit in the palm of his hand, whimpering and howling. In the other hand he held the jackknife.

An old man with knots of gray hair falling in his face ran the cone of light over the newborn's crippled, bloody body. The young men bunched together, one of them gave a hearty laugh. Others began to straggle in from the darkness deep beneath the bridge, soles clicking over the rocks. A hint of rain reached them on the wind as they crooned and nattered. Of course to the newly turned father, kneeling with his small son against his body, every sound was an expression of nature, all the universe was singing its symphony, rejoicing to the heavens and conveying its support.

But these were men. So he stood up, and noticing the open knife in his hand, blood-covered and wet with slime and goo from the umbilical cord, he turned it on the new arrivals.

Sa va? inquired the shaggy-haired old man.

Sa va byen!

Shok vray um port uh kuto, said the old-timer, taking the knife from his hand.

Soña was surrounded by women. And squeezed in behind them, a whole flock of girls. The womenfolk gathered around her, laying sweaters beneath her head, caressing and kneading her aching body. They had water with them. A few commands and the younger ones padded off into the darkness under the bridge.

Papa moved toward her. Claspng the tiny little boy gently in both palms. Soña peered at the company gathered around through half-shut eyes. Then her face convulsed in a spasm. And then another.

The screaming started up again, and her belly began to swell like a sack. She jerked and thrashed, screaming and spreading her legs. The

gaggle of twittering female assistants reached out to soothe her, holding her hands, wiping her forehead.

Papa hadn't thought he was capable of movement, but a power greater than his drove him toward her, toward the cluster. Through the women's arms and elbows he saw Soňa's thighs opening wide. Then a new tiny little head pushed its way out of her body, another child coming into the world.

They had helped them. They helped them out enormously. Back in their campsite they had water, hot water, as much as was needed. Their own besmudged little children were happy to do without a bath. And someone even got through to the clinic on the phone.

They sent Soňa on her way with a full baby bottle, clothes, wads of exotic cotton, a lemon, and all kinds of tiny sweet fruits the parents had never laid eyes on before. And in one final friendly gesture, the old-timer thrust the jackknife into Papa's hand. Rinsed and cleaned. Yep, it had turned out well.

This time they cross the bridge without incident, leaving it far behind in the distance of the parched landscape.

Hey, by the way, did you say ailing? Soňa says, picking up the conversation where they left off. Her voice is a raspy shriek, likely foretelling further unpleasantness.

That's like from World War II, no one says that anymore! she declares, patting down her jacket, digging through her skirt pockets for her drug paraphernalia.

Upon which Papa informs her that her current belief that her stoned consciousness is more expansive, more entertaining, and more expressive of the human condition than the consciousness of someone who is not ingesting toxins is not objective, but just part of her addiction.

There you go with the fatherly talk! Shit, I might as well be home!

But you're gettin older too, don't forget. Your eyes are like slits in the morning. You party constantly, not to mention you're gainin weight.

The fuck're you talkin about? My leg hurts is all!

Look, don't think you're immune. Nobody is. Like it or not!

Stop psychin me out!

And you constantly complain, have you noticed? That's also new.

This time, for a change, she pulls out a silver tube, which he snatches out of her hand and flings into the back of the car.

She belts him one. Though by now, of course, he is skilled at dodging her blows. He has also grown accustomed to her strident tone, whereas a normal human being would be numbstruck by the grinding buzz saw of her indignation. He just closes his inner ears. Papa yanks the wheel, steering them out of the way of the wildly gesticulating oncoming drivers, their appearances merging into a tangled mass that vanishes into oblivion, as she leans into the back, hugs the boy, and presses her head to the sweaty little notch at his throat.

3

CHARLEVILLE, LES POÈTES MAUDITS.
SECURING PROVISIONS. PREPARING THE
PERFORMANCE. BRIELLE AND ONWARD.
TO MUNICH. ZOSHCHENKO'S END.
TO THE LAND OF CHILL.

You know what Charles Baudelaire wrote? That the Belgians were cud-chewers who couldn't digest a thing, Papa says, smiling out the window at the organizers in rain ponchos directing them to the parking lot at the local house of culture.

Also, when he was in Belgium he lost the urge to smoke, but he couldn't help himself, so it was extremely unpleasant, Papa explains to the family on their trip to the bordertown supermarket.

Keep him distracted, Papa says, tipping his shoulder toward the guy creeping along the aisle behind the family, not letting them out of his sight.

Soña, little one in her arms with the bigger boy in tow, collapses into the store detective's arms, and as she blurts out the international expression: water! shedding an actor's tears from her eye, Papa zips past the registers. A few moments later, around the corner from the supermarket, the family divvies up the fine Swiss chocolates and gourmet sausages, along with some minibottles of vitamin solution Papa managed to squeeze into the paper sacks that officially housed only a few croissants, which he of course paid for, plenty. And as the fab little bottles of Jim Beam and Jack Daniel's spill out of his pantlegs, and he tries to explain to the boys that those are just for him, Soña is having none of it.

I'm amazed they don't have scanners at the registers like at the airports. Oh well. They'll get em eventually, but for now at least we're good.

Where are we anyway? Soňa inquires, dark as a Moor herself as she wipes the boy's chocolate-smearred face with a spit-soaked handkerchief, clutching a pack of diapers under each arm.

Charleville, says Papa. A couple boxes of sardines come loose, dropping out of his sleeves. I throw a pair of undies over the cameras, he explains. Learned that back in commie days. I had a buddy who'd walk into a Tuzex in Poland or Hungary wearing a pair of shorts and walk out again in three pairs of jeans. We'd sell em around the corner and party for a week. Ah, youth!

What time do we perform today?

Yep, then in New York I had a friend that had these custom pockets sewed into his coat, and he'd go out and shoplift books, or sometimes even steaks. This one time he put a steak that he'd nabbed out of a freezer in the same pocket as this expensive picture book, talk about a stupid move, and this girl I lived with got all huffy whenever I'd cook up one of his steaks, like, "Stolen goods? I'm not eating that." It was just plain theft as far as she was concerned.

Girl?

One of those ones I knew back in the day, before you came into the world.

Mm-hmmm.

Oh, come on now, they were just mattresses that I practiced on until I met you. So you'd be satisfied! Anyway, the only thing I ever stole was some food, just a little, I was broke. Gavros was my hero. That scene where he steals the swan to feed his two lost little brothers, that is seared into my brain. We should do it someday! But of course your generation doesn't read Victor Hugo. Oh well. Can't say that I blame you.

You're mixin it all up.

That's true, but it is all mixed up.

Plus you already told me all that before!

Sorry!

Let's talk about somethin else.

What for?

During their siesta in the car, Papa proposes to Soňa that as long as they're in the birthplace of the master Baudelaire, they should act out

an excerpt from "A Carcass." She can play the starring role, and the boys can circle around her, playing the flies, while he recites the lines, but in a way that offers hope. She interrupts him to point out that Charleville is the birthplace of another poet legend as well.

Right, he went out with Baudelaire, didn't he? They were queer as all get-out! I donno if I could pull that off.

No, that was that other poet that went out with the guy from here, says Soña, eyes glued to her phone.

Whatever, either way they were all accursed.

Fine, if you say so!

I can't remember everything, can I? Papa grumbles. Plus you know we weren't allowed to go to school! Not everyone's born velvet! All those privileges. Freedom! Yeah, I mean you! You're what they call a child of the Velvet Revolution.

Do you even have a high school diploma?

You bet, and a nice one too. Got it right here in my suitcase somewhere.

Heh-heh-heh!

Though they did nail me in fourth grade. I ever tell you that?

Who "they"?

The ess-tee-bee, secret police! That's how it was in those days . . .

Don't bother. I know the stories from my dad.

Oh yeah?

Only he was on the other side.

Yeah, well, after that, in the nuthouse, that's where I found myself, art therapy. There was this nurse there, actually more than one. They brought me books, banned ones too. They enjoyed hearing me recite. There was a doctor too. Psychologist, actually. She was always on my side.

Uh-huh, the usual story.

Basically, she ended up as my slave. All of us nutjobs had to go on walks. Calisthenics, ping-pong, that sorta crap. She exempted me from all that. We spent the whole time in her office. She was great!

So actually it was a good thing.

The main thing was, I didn't want to go in the army. Who knew where the Russkies would send you? Afghanistan, Poland . . .

So you got out of it . . .

Yeah, I can tell you now, you're an adult. But supposedly I was the

only one she ever had an orgasm with, so she didn't want to discharge me. Things got a bit tricky after that.

You poor thing!

Yeah, talk about a wild ride, but there's always someone you find who can help. That's the art of war.

Oh, spare me, what war? Nowadays? My dad . . . hey, these Pampers're amazing. I guess they gave em to me cause they thought I was a refugee.

Are you kidding? What do you mean, refugee? They give those out to all the women here. It's a rich country.

You think?

Sure.

Papa crawls into the space behind the sleeping bags and crates and heaps of paperbacks and boxes of Chinese soup and the stove and everything else they have back there, opens a notebook, and starts scrawling away.

This here set of wheels has got some serious miles on her, says Papa, patting the dashboard as they zoom down the highway through gale-force winds that batter and churn the windmill blades, spoiling the views over the swampy flatland . . . I probably already told you how I scrounged up the cash for it. Soon as the Czechs joined NATO and the EU, I took my poems out on the road. They invited me all over the place. When I was in jail under the Bolshies, locked up for my resistance poetry—man, that was the tour to end all tours! Yeah, that's not gonna happen again!

You've told me that story a thousand times. How the Westerners ate it up . . .

They were curious about us backwoods clods from Eastern Europe. That was still under Havel.

Right, but things're different now, huh?

Hm.

We've got problems now, huh?

Well, the scene is different today, for sure. Spontaneous poetry and Beatnik stuff, that's all gone. Fuckin committees all over the place. A million emails for every stupid little thing! And, as long as I'm bein bitter, the ethnic card doesn't exactly play to our strong suit either.

Oh, come off it. We've both noticed nobody ever invites us back anywhere.

True!

We're gettin tired, if you ask me.

Y'know, it's one thing puttin together a poetry evening and somethin else comin up with a play for a family. So it kina makes sense. Plus I had different needs back then. What're you gonna do?

Oh, cut the crap. They took us a lot when I had a belly, and how many times did they do it to take pity on the kids? I really don't think it has all that much to do with your genius.

Hey, look where we are! Check it out! Remember?

They zip past the highway signs for Bruges and Damme. And there's no use his inviting her to look when her eye has just landed on their little son's halberd.

It was like this.

He was rolling around in the back of the van fishing for ideas, but it didn't click until she googled where they were, that is, where the festival was taking place. In the south of Holland, Brielle, the festival of the Geuzen rebels . . .

Well, shit, then it's simple, he informed her and the boys. Damme is where Till Eulenspiegel died. In elementary school we learned that was the Dutch people's liberation struggle against the usurpers as part of the effort to install communism. I read it as a little boy in the children's hospital psych ward. The Geuzen? We got our show in the bag!

Soña, high as a kite on whatever drugs she was doing that day, circled the stage in a hooded cape with cutout holes that Papa made from a sack of fertilizer he found lying out behind the local supermarket, which perfectly evoked the inquisition. She played the role of the tyrant, the Duke of Alba, reaching out her claws toward the boys, who played the rebellious Geuzen.

The big boy banged a drum, weapon at the ready, with the little nipper suspended over the stage in a traditional clog-shaped cradle, representing the future of the Netherlands, while Papa with a loaf of cheese tucked under his peasant's frock, borrowed from the prop man, played the mighty Thyl Ulenspiegel. And as he bellowed out the Geuzens' battle song—

Tear out the Duke of Alba's intestines
whip him in the face with them!

the boy chopped away at Soňa till she began to totter and collapsed onto his halberd, and apart from poking out her eye, she also nicely bruised her ribs while she was rolling around on the floor howling in pain.

So now instead they just bypass it and cruise on through Germany, weaving and dodging their way around the former wintering spots, since the local officials have the boys in their sights, and moreover one friendly squat, which in past years they had used to take a break and supplement the boy's more than spotty school attendance with home schooling, has burned clear down; another has been converted into a youth hostel for young millionaires; a kulturhaus where Papa once had friends from the days after the fall of the curtain is now a residence for writers fleeing Egypt, Algeria, Turkey, Syria . . . In other spots where art-loving Eastern Europeans once flocked they find new asyl-houses for people in genuine distress; and in place of a small alter-native farm they used to frequent is a brand spanking new feminist zone: NO MAN—NO PIG PLACE. Soňa is thrilled when she first sees it, but then changes her mind. In another picturesque little town, they stumble into the midst of a rowdy demonstration, with naturally no idea what the residents are marching for, but when a couple of locals decide to flip their vehicle, children or no, Papa shifts into reverse and the family keeps on trucking. Everywhere they go, the squares and plazas where people of similar appearance once strolled, trying to make up their minds where to go and who with, are now lined with ranks of im-poverished refugees, guarded by smiling police and soldiers, two me-ters tall, blond and blue-eyed, slim, muscular, and armed to the teeth, dispensing goodwill at full blast.

Sometimes Soňa can't resist, veiling herself like it was just another acting exercise, and as long as the other ladies don't hound her out of line she comes back to the car each time lugging packages of groceries and hygiene supplies, plus a cleaning agent or two, which she doesn't know how to use anyway.

They don't really hit bottom till Munich.

The commissioner of the venerable Freies Theater festival insists that they first undergo an interview and auditions, only after which he will

decide whether and in which category of the festival—now of course being held to mark the four hundredth anniversary of William Shakespeare—to include them, which is crucial, since that means money.

The commissioner has a metal cashbox open on the table before him, glowing with banknotes in every color of the EU. He's a good-looking fellow, too. The way the shine of his teeth accords with the sparkle of his obviously tailored-to-fit leather shoes makes the ruffled acting duo just a wee bit nervous. An artistic ringlet hangs down across the man's forehead, and when he speaks of literature, the commissioner's eyes glaze over with a sheen of dreamy awe. His gaze is flat, roving, perhaps even Hölderlinesque, as Papa excitedly whispers to Soňa.

The wide-open window of the ground-floor office affords a view of the other acting troupes in various stages of rehearsing or loafing about. A Tatar group called Crimea Sunrise is busy limbering up. Georgians from the company Papa's Sharp Sabre are practicing tricks with their various sharp objects. The mood is cheerful and lively as the smiling Afghans in their turbans and brightly colored robes shyly trickle into the courtyard along with a few Chechens from the line of refugees winding across the square. To the delight and curiosity of the international small fry, a group of authentic Ukrainian folk musicians are scraping the verdigris off their trumpets. But there are beads of sweat standing out on Papa's brow.

What does he mean we were supposed to mail in our application a year in advance? I've played here so many damn times I can't even count!

Well, that's what he says!

Hell! Used to be enough just to show up on time! They were glad to have us! They all know who I am!

You mean back in the days when Havel was president, right?

Well, there didn't used to be so many troupes, I guess, Papa says, cooling down.

He also wants you to explain why Forefather Czech is in *The Winter's Tale*.

Well, when Antigonus lands on the Bohemian coast, the cabin boy cries: Beware! There lurk creatures of prey in this land! And Forefather Czech appears!

He doesn't seem convinced.

Well, it's very alternative. But seeing as we're Czechs, and this is the only Shakespeare piece about the Czech lands, it should be acceptable. It's our right!

He says it doesn't seem that way to him.

And you're sure you translated correctly?

Of course!

Look, tell him . . .

Forget it! We're just embarrassing ourselves. Let's go, c'mon.

Just then, a fearful voice echoes through the kulturhaus. The entire ground floor shakes with screams, including the room where they stand before the commissioner. He too gets nervous, nods to them, they rush out the door.

The spectacle that greets them upon entering the next room makes Soňa put her hand over the big boy's eyes.

The world-famous and renowned Shakespeare actor, the Russian genius Zoshchenko, known for his performances as Macbeth, Caliban, and Henry IV, reclines on a bed in a pool of blood. A dagger protrudes from his chest, its richly crafted hilt still quivering. The commissioner screams and fishes his phone from his pocket. As the whole courtyard rushes toward the open window, the frightened shouts show no signs of letting up.

They don't want us! Maybe the bossman here reads, says Soňa sarcastically as they stride across the oil-stained surface of the parking lot. And maybe he knows a smelly ham when he sees one!

He just isn't the type to appreciate a postmodern, alternative, multicultural approach!

That's old hat now!

Mainly it's bullshit. That was wild with Zoshchenko, though, right? You think the fest'll be canceled?

All you think about is yourself. Poor Vitaly Semyonovich, maybe he's got a family. Who do you think did it?

Hard to say. Besides, you never know with Russians! Maybe he got sad, maybe he was down in the dumps and just . . . I really liked him too.

You don't have to take the piss out of everything. Sometimes I'm not in the mood! What're we gonna do now? We're flush outta cash, Jesus and Mary!

Don't take the Lord's name in vain. And to no purpose. Maybe there'll be a miracle.

Now you're fundamentally pissing me off! You're a gasbag and an ego-tripper and a manipulator!

Now, now . . .

And an alcoholic and a clown and a nutjob!

I get sad too sometimes, you know.

Jesus and Mary, when you told me I was the best back then at the Pohoda fest in Trenčín! That was beautiful. And to think I believed you!

But it was true!

Waaaaah, ach ich!

Y'know, Soňa, I always pictured our son as the cabin boy in *The Winter's Tale* shouting that line about Bohemia!

What?

Beware! There lurk beasts of prey in this land!

Jesus and Mary! Our son? Shout?

Well, speak, anyway. Maybe he'd like that!

If only! Soňa bursts into tears and kneels down and hugs the boy, sobbing into his neck.

Listen, Soňa, those poor refugees from bombed-out homes, families shattered, some of em with torture scars, those poor souls have no idea what's in store . . . we're doin pretty good!

Oh fuck off!

What do you say we go to Budapest and then on to Slovakia?

Huh?

By the time we get to Slovakia, we're practically home. Just a hop, skip, and a jump from there to Sázava. I told you how my dad and brother started those famous motorcycle races there.

You told me a thousand times how poor you were as a little boy.

My brother and me used to fight in the barn. He's a good bit older than I am. The barn was where him and my dad kept the bikes.

So he must be an old geezer by now! Those races're practically stone age!

As it happens, the motocross in Poříčí nad Sázavou's really something! To this day, I kid you not!

I'm sure.

Plus I'd like to show the boys!

Seriously?

You get in first . . . here, I'll hold the door. Hey, boys, come on, what's the fuss, up you go, settle in! We're goin to Slovakia. Home, here we come!

Home, huh? The only one here from Czechoslovakia's you, you old coot, Soňa says, now in the front seat.

That's right, and I'll never stop bein sorry that we split with the Slovaks. I'll be Czechoslovak till the day I die, even if my kids're just Czechs. Like you. What's it like bein just Czech? Don't you feel a little deprived?

Why should I?

Emotionally I still see Czechoslovakia as my homeland, says Papa, slamming his fist on the dashboard, spitting out the window, and honking the horn.

How come?

It's what I'm used to.

Basically, though, same difference, far as I'm concerned.

You're right.

Ach ich!

Please, come on, don't cry. You'll frighten the boys. Now, now. No need for tears.

But it helps.

All right then, it's all right.

I'm not even allowed to cry anymore.

It's fine.

Cords of rain beat against the windows. A little stream right by the rest area is taking a pounding, foaming up, bounding along the concrete gutter. The drain ripples with the incoming water.

The still-drowsy Soňa nudges Papa's tousled head.

So're we goin'?

She gapes in disbelief at the wads of bills—not only blue and pink, but green, yellow, and purple too—shuffling through his hands. Her gaze slides down to the floor. The cashbox.

We're fucked. You're insane.

Not to worry. No one'll be any the worse! I guarantee you they're insured. They got the whole thing covered, relax! They know what they're doin.

They're gonna lock you up!
Are you kiddin? They'll just write it off.
You think?
You saw what it looked like back there. Nothing but suffering masses.
No way will they investigate!
He rolls down the window and flings the empty cashbox into the
drainage ditch.
Now he's got a road map over the tattered notebooks on his lap.
We gotta go through Hungary. We can perform there. I know it there.
Yeah?
Yeah, sure. The Hungarians're great, totally chill.
You think?
You'll see!