

SYLVA FISCHEROVÁ

It's About the Grub, Man

Translated from Czech by Deborah Garfinkle

I.

THE GLOSSY BUFFET TRAYS were heated to perfection: those on the left provided a temporary home for bratwurst and breakfast links; those on the right, bacon and grilled tomatoes; those in the middle hosted scrambled eggs; and, next to them, resting amicably, fried eggs, lightly dusted with paprika. The cold food bar was brimming with an array of cheeses, neatly arranged fruits of all colors, and silver bowls reflecting the sliced vegetable crudités; next to them lay bowls with several different kinds of olives and an assortment of rolls and baked goods in woven baskets.

S. loaded up her plate up with bacon and scrambled eggs; after mulling it over, she added two more Bavarian sausages and tomatoes, which she topped off with pickles, salad from the cold food bar, and toast (which required her performing a minor operation with the toaster), and then she turned and faced the room. It was half empty; most of the Congress's participants were still sleeping off yesterday's banquet. S. headed, quite securely, along the wall to an empty table by the window, ignoring the half-occupied round tables in the middle of the room.

"Good morning, Doctor!"

A gray-haired professor waved to her with a fork that had a sausage impaled on it, while his neighbor coupled a smile with a vague gesture of invitation, using the spoon he'd utilized to stir his coffee. One of them was named Cvachovec (or Žvahovec?), the other Chytra. She was sure about Chytra. One was the chairman, the other the vice-chairman, of the Society of Intensive Care Medicine. In any case, they were both professors.

"Good morning, Professor."

She placed her tray on the table and tossed her tote bag across the back of the chair. The tote was full of promotional flyers that the organizers had stuffed into the conference folder. Yesterday, when she had opened it up in her hotel room, the convention program didn't

pop out at her, but the flyer for RE-LY did: life-threatening bleeding. *Fibrinogen is the first factor in RE-LY attaining critically low levels!*

The photo illustration showed three bright red beans, which were most reminiscent of inflatable rafts, but instead of their bobbing up and down and gently slapping the surface, they were tangled up in weird vines. Floating there with them were also five jellyfish in the shape of frosted oak leaves. Were they maybe supposed to be blood cells? Or platelets? She wasn't a doctor. They'd invited her to attend the conference to talk about the content and binding nature of medical oaths and declarations, apparently, on the off chance that someone among the participants might still be interested. She set the bean rafts aside and browsed through the flyers until she finally came upon the titles of the individual talks:

Honor Diagnostics—The Point-of-Care Testing Environment that Honors Your Patients. She just about fell out of her seat. What the bloody hell is an environment of honor? the stench of Vladislav Hall at Prague Castle, of that stable, the fangles and nabobs, and the idiotic manure slurries of idiotic slurries? Things really got going after that honor: first came the *Organ Donors After Cardiac Death.* Then *Gases and the Critically Ill.* Then *Management of the Endotracheal Tube Cuff*, which didn't sound bad at all! It had style. It was almost good enough for Vladislav Hall. It required a bow tie. And catering. Not to mention the cuff. After the cuff came *Discharging a Patient Diagnosed with Ondine's Curse to Homecare.*

Ondine's curse! It made her fall out of the hotel chair for a second time. Ondine was a water sprite. Something to do with waves. She'd sail off on those blood-red beans to the seas of creeping vines that were cursed, and not one of them would get either the cuff or the ETT or . . .

"I see you've gone about it responsibly," Professor Cvachovec (or Chytra) said, eyeing her plate.

"I have a weakness for English breakfasts," she said. "They're only missing the pickled mushrooms and baked beans in tomato sauce. Excuse me, I'm going to get some tea."

"—no, it was in Houston, about three years ago, at the World Congress of Cardiology . . ." Cvachovec (or Chytra) put a dash of pepper on his eggs and offered S. the sugar bowl, which she declined. "They took breakfast seriously there, too, and it looked just like it does here, nothing but sausages, bacon, eggs—and you could see how the biggest experts in the field, who must have known those clogged

arteries by heart, who could see them simply by closing their eyes, in a word, the biggest experts in the field didn't help themselves to the cornflakes with milk, yogurt or fruit, no, there was a line at the hot food bar and they all were eating eggs, bacon, ham, sausages, carrying plates piled high and everyone was stuffing themselves on it, well, it was unbelievable."

"It's a well-known fact," said Chytra (or Cvachovec), "that fat is a source of enormous gustatory pleasure, almost to the heights of the joys of sex, so it's no wonder that Neanderthals, and others like them, sucked the marrow out of the bones until it ran down their chins. At that moment, they must have been in paradise, seventh heaven. Sure beats a woman, I'd say."

"Yeah," Cvachovec Chytra said, "you're right. Imagine, we had a cat, and he could sure chow down on fat, yeah, he'd eat the ham, but only after he'd first devoured the fat! When we gave it to him, he'd stand on his hind legs like a meerkat, and then even jump about a half a meter in the air like a pug in the circus. Yeah, the cat went nuts over it."

"Good morning! May I join you?"

"Of course, Doctor! Please do, we've still got one place free."

It was Dr. Horváthová, whose task, the day before, had been to advise convention participants on how to communicate with Romany patients and their relatives ("Mainly, don't use Latin words and technical terms—that'll get you nowhere; furthermore, you have to respect the differences among individual groups of Roma, for example, Czech Roma, of whom there are few left, and Slovak Roma, who are the majority in our country, same for the differences in social status within the community. The essential thing is . . .").

"Why so healthy?" Chytra Cvachovec said, staring at the cornflakes and yogurt, orange, and whole grain roll on the newcomer's plate.

"Well, I have to be. High cholesterol, the beginnings of gout—what can you do?"

"There's nothing you can do," Chytra Chytra said. "After my heart attack, I also changed everything—I stopped smoking, drinking coffee, and started cycling."

"Really? And have you got a bike here? Just so you know," Cvachovec Žvahovec gave the ladies a smile, "he rides his bike at every conference and after always does a tour of the town."

"Of course I have. I'm just heading out while the weather's still nice. They predict rain and showers around noon, you know. I was

happy.” There was a series of handshakes and then Professor Professor took his greasy plate with its paltry scraps of leftover eggs and the lone bite of Bavarian sausage to the busing station.

“It’s best, in my opinion, not to get into those habits at all,” the remaining Professor Professor said. “Then you won’t have to give them up. If you simply don’t start with the sausages and bratwurst, you’ll never miss them.”

“You’d be surprised, Professor!” Dr. Horváthová, who was herself one-quarter Gypsy, as she’d confided to them the previous day, appeared thrilled. “My sister’s husband is from a Catholic family, and one of their relatives is with the order of the Discalced Carmelites. They’re known for being strictly cloistered, they couldn’t even visit her, for years, well, now that she’s ninety, a blessed age, they let her leave the convent. She can simply stay at our relatives’ house. Well, she makes the most of it! If you could only see! She’s so happy to be at their house, and she has smoked tongue and roast beef, and pork rinds, which she loves most of all, and red wine to go with it, everything tastes awfully delicious to her and, as I say, she’s ninety . . .”

“Well, there you go,” Professor winks at S., “those pork rinds, that’s just what we were talking about. Like fat on the ham. What we all wouldn’t do to get some. But you know what—I’ll bet you anything that she got into the habit as a child, and as I was saying, habit’s a chain mail shirt, right? Seventy years to the Carmelites doesn’t even mean a thing. Or, as they say in Iceland, whatever goes into the barrel first, you’ll be stuck with the smell forever. Pickled herring or sausages. It’s been pleasant spending the morning with you, ladies.” The professor bade farewell, shaking one hand after the next.

S. hesitates for a moment, but then, after all, decides, “I wanted to ask—you know, you were telling us last night”—(the banquet after the conference: tables overflow with food and drink, a line forms especially at the excellent veal cheeks in wine sauce and then goes next door to the wine bar for a while, the only business open in the city at that hour, and then come the anecdotes from their medical studies and professional practice)—“the story of what happened at your wedding, your relatives got into such a big argument there that they really haven’t talked since—so, if you’re not offended—I didn’t want to ask yesterday because there were too many people around and if it’s too personal, if you don’t want to talk about it, of course, please forgive me for asking, but if you don’t mind, can you tell me exactly

what happened?"

"It's simple," Dr. Horváthová, herself one-quarter Gypsy, an intelligent, good-looking woman, doesn't hesitate and answers immediately. S. tops off their tea from the teapot. "They were arguing about the wedding swag. At a Gypsy wedding, the custom is for each guest to receive swag. They calculate the favors so there's basically enough for everyone. Only there weren't enough—it's hard to say why—but my husband's relatives, most of whom were there—as I've already said, unlike me, he's a pure-blooded Gypsy—well, his relatives—there were about 150 of them—blamed my relatives, of whom there were only just a couple—one's a computer engineer, another's a doctor, my sister's a teacher and their families and my parents—in short, they accused the couple of relatives I had there of taking more than their fair share, that they'd taken too many. Well, from that time on the families haven't spoken to each other at all."

"Not at all? Just because of the wedding swag?"

"Exactly, because of the swag."

"Doctors!" The face of Dr. Chorý, the conference's main organizer, shone above a plate of bratwurst and scrambled eggs. "Good morning! May I join you?"

2.

MISE EN SCENE: Znojmo, The Chaplain's House Wine Bar on the Thaya, a summer evening, an August evening, a balmy evening. Blood courses through the stream, small canoes are sailing on it, they want to reach shore, arrive someplace, then ram it on home, later. But not just yet. Now it's a balmy evening. The waiter hands out the wine list. He acts the sommelier, SOMMELIER, writ large. He suggests wine from the Šobes vineyard, the best in the district, the valley! The Thaya's waters rising! The sun. And some almonds to go with it? Or olives? Green or black? Well, naturally, when you pick a Traminer off the house list after a Šobes, you're taking a step down, a step down, that's clear to you, right?

But was it really clear to them? She sips, leaves it up to him, he makes out like he knows. Let's try something else, and what would you recommend? And almonds to go with it, or would you like pretzel sticks? Aha, let's do almonds and pretzel sticks. I hope they're at least a little salty, right, Iva? Iva takes a sip, gazes down at the Thaya, the sky

turns dark blue with dramatic bands. In a while, night will fall, the canoe will travel down other locks. Some sommelier (it's summer, isn't it?) brings a round of the Welschriesling. You've made a fine choice, he drones, it's full bodied, see for yourself. Iva clinks her glass, nibbles on an almond and says, Just look at us, Pavel, we're doing nothing but just sitting here and consuming and consuming. Pavel smiles. Hand upon hand (a canoe built for two: Iva and Pavel), the view of darkening sky. But what else is it really all about? Why do we do it all and wear ourselves out, other than for evenings like this? Iva takes a sip of Welschriesling, she's getting used to the idea and it's not so bad! It's not a bad idea at all. Hey, Pavel, I guess you're right.

The truth of the table is the truth of the table is the truth of the table. At the next table, the one nearer the river, a trio sits—she, she, and he—some sommelier doesn't hook them with his snobby Šobes vintage. They go for a carafe off the day's wine list: Veltliner. Let's start from this premise, he says, a middle-aged man with a belly, but with determination in his tone and gestures, that in Moravia, due to its geographic location, red doesn't grow well, can't even grow at all, but that's not true for white! And, particularly, not for what they serve here. Zina and Sophie, cheers!

Clink, clink, clink and we move on, to conversation, to the river, the Thaya, its etymology. It sounds like it could be from the Greek, like a goddess, no? Zina says. Yeah, it's Greek to you, Sophie shoots back, but that's definitely not it. Dan, you don't know by any chance? My father would know, Dan says, but I don't, I have the feeling it's Indo-European, that it's not, you know, like obscure.

And the sky's already dark and deep, it pans the stars, one after the other, they fall into Thaya's lap. The other day I came across a joke from the '40s that I'd never heard before. You wanna hear it? Out with it, Zina says. Sophie's already chuckling in advance, drinking wine, gazing at the river and Dan. I'm not familiar with the ones from the '40s at all, she says, at home, we just had a book of anecdotes from the time of the Nazi protectorate. One day, Dan begins, taking a sip of his Veltliner, the Gottwalds go to a reception at Prague Castle. Marta Gottwaldová is stuffing herself on one delicacy after the next. After a half-hour of non-stop stuffing her face, she doesn't feel too good, so she runs through the halls, asking everyone she sees, Where's the bog? But none of the posh people there understand her, they have no idea what she's talking about. So, in great haste, Marta dashes across the Spanish Hall and

charges screaming into the garden. She jumps into the bushes, squats down, well, it's already dropping out of her, a bomb, sorry, ladies, to spoil your wine, well, it's already out. Marta turns around because she wants to tidy it up somehow, throw it away, but on the grass there's nothing there! Absolutely nothing! It's completely gone, immediately, she runs to Klemmy and says, Hey, you'd be amazed by the facilities the bourgeoisie have got here, imagine, they've got something in the garden that cleans the shit up all by itself! We've gotta get our hands on such a contraption. The next morning, a sad Mrs. Hana Beneš runs up to Eddy Beneš in his study and says, Edvard, oh, Edvard, imagine what happened, last night somebody pooped on our turtle!

Zina and Sophie are laughing, they're also laughing over at the next table, a party of people, probably from Prague, they've overheard the entire joke or just a portion of it, the turtle covered in poop, Well, I wasn't expecting that, one of them says, Me neither, his neighbor says, a beautiful woman with cleavage fit for the farmer's daughter, fit for Vladislav Hall, quite a surprise.

Shall we also have something to go with the wine, Sophie suggests. Garçon, what've you got? Zina takes charge of the organizing as usual. Well, only bar snacks, olives, pretzel sticks, roasted almonds. And how about some pickled veggies? Znojmo pickles or chili peppers, Sophie says, she's looking for something to munch on. Yeah, we had them last year, but they didn't catch on, customers didn't eat them, so this year we haven't got any, I'm sorry, madam, olives, pretzels, almonds. But I hope you didn't have sauerkraut, Zina says, or did you? The server's somewhat taken aback, Why, for god's sake, wine with sauerkraut, but deco decorum, he quips, Certainly not, it would never do to sell it here, but Zina's already off and running, by that I mean, in particular, you didn't serve Bystročice sauerkraut, I hope? We have never served any sauerkraut; the server's grasped that he's missed something, but he doesn't know what. Because Bystročice sauerkraut is a sin against sauerkraut! You should be punished for it, not sell it. Zina's eyes shine with a frenetic gleam, they even claim that their heads of cabbage are grown in the Haná region, that they're genuine Hanakian heads, but do you know what they do with those heads? First, they put meatballs in mustard sauce in with them, second, they add allspice, but third, my dear sir, they sweeten them! Can you imagine! It's like adding sugar to wine. Would you ever contemplate sweetening wine? Somme sommelier recoils, Certainly not, what do you take me for, a

barbarian? So, it's going to be the almonds? We'll have the olives, Sophie says, it's a shame you don't have the pickles. I don't know why you just don't give the Bystročice sauerkraut a rest, Dan says and tops off her glass, since you really could care less about it. How can I not care when they treat sauerkraut this way. It's a crime, you know, what my mother used to sing to me when I was little: There's no kraut like sauerkraut—Some is sickly sweet, Sophie chimes in, some makes you pucker, but others are a tasty treat. We've heard all of this before, Zina. So what's there to wonder? Zina wonders. But it's gotta taste good to someone, Sophie says, otherwise, they probably wouldn't buy it and there'd be no Sauerkraut of the Year, either. What wouldn't there be? Zina thinks that she hasn't heard right, she finishes her glass, the carafe is empty. You don't know? They named Bystročice sauerkraut Sauerkraut of the Year at the Czech Agricultural Fair in Litoměřice. Hmm, Zina perks up, and just how do you know that, Sophie? Dad likes it, so Mom buys it for him. It's written right there on the jar in bold letters, SAUERKRAUT OF THE YEAR, you can't miss it.

SAUERKRAUT OF THE YEAR! Zina's on the verge of losing it. Hey, garçon, can you bring us another carafe? Right at that moment, a new group arrives, a group of four. Zina's eyes flash, she's opening her mouth, apparently getting ready to subject them to an interrogation about Bystročice sauerkraut, maybe she'll even take a poll, but suddenly, Sophie becomes white as a sheet and runs to the toilet. She has to go downstairs. Iva throws her a look, She's pregnant, trust me, they always look that way at the beginning, and besides, the wine's gotten to her; hey, do you think it's his? She points discreetly to Dan. Pavel looks at Dan and Zina. Dan gets up and pays. Zina, let's go, he gives her a hug. Well, it doesn't look that way, Pavel says, it looks to me like those two are together. They may well be, but that doesn't mean a thing! Iva says, you'd be surprised, Pavel, at what we sometimes see at the hospital postpartum behind the scenes, well, you'd be surprised. It can easily be his, quite easily, take it from me.

3.

LET'S TAKE TWO women and one man. Let's have them sitting in a restaurant on the first floor of the ugly socialist-realist palace of culture in a district town, where a book fair takes place once a year. Robert, Ella, and Jarka are browsing the menu. They're serving beef consommé

with noodles; there's also a choice of roast chicken with mashed potatoes or fried cauliflower with boiled potatoes or kidneys with rice.

Speaking of kidneys, Renata always has them, Ella says, or calf's liver, too, just the innards, even beef heart with bacon, she adores it.

Renata? Which Renata? Jarka doesn't know which Renata, which innards.

The one who was working as an editor for BB Press, then she went out with Wiedermann for a long time.

You mean the historian who specialized in President Háchá?

Well, he originally did Háchá, but then he switched to Czech and Slovak immigration in Latin America, he was always going there, well, and—

And the waitress is here. Ella and Jarka get the chicken (dietary, fewer calories), Robert orders the cauliflower (it's not meat).

Yeah, and she went with him (Ella's getting going, she's looking forward to the chicken with mashed potatoes, whipped the way they used to do it in the cafeteria at school, she never mixes them at home, only grinds them in a grinder, but it's probably not called a grinder, only what is it called? maybe a masher?), she packed it in at work and traveled with him on all his internships and traveling fellowships. They went down to Machu Picchu and Buenos Aires, then the Yucatán, Mississippi, Florida, a regular ready-made romantic travelogue it was. Well, and then they came home and he left her: after all, he has a wife and kids he can't leave; he's a piece of work, right? What's more, Renata was forty-five, ten years older than him. She started drinking and ended up in the madhouse.

And now how's she doing? Jarka's curious, she's always been curious.

She doesn't communicate. She just sits on the bed and looks out the window. Her son comes to visit her, but she doesn't talk to him either. She's completely catatonic. And no one knows how to help her.

So what do the doctors say?

That it usually resolves with time. So they have to wait and see. But what if it doesn't resolve?

I knew a woman, Robert picks up the thread (the meal hasn't started out badly at all), who fell in love with a Grailist. The Grailist was a friend of mine from high school, he was never interested in any religion, but then all of a sudden the Grail Society—I didn't get it at all, in every other way, Vlasta was completely normal. Well, he went with them to a get-together they used to have in the Austrian Alps, he went out in

the early evening just to take a walk in the mountains and because it was dark, he fell off a cliff and broke his neck. He was barely thirty. And the gal he was going out with—I saw her at the funeral, such a mousy person, she didn't stand out in any way—later went nuts. The grail appeared to her, most importantly with Vlasta, who handed the grail to her, he had a halo around his head, he stood on the edge of a well and handed her the grail. That's what she kept proclaiming all around the Grail Community, where naturally they had no need for it, so they locked her up in a madhouse, too.

And then what happened? Jarka's curious, she's always been curious.

I don't know; I don't have contact with those people anymore. I don't know what happened afterward.

Well, that is something, but let me tell you what I got out of Fanda the other day—about the author who writes women's novels.

You mean Monyová? The one who was murdered?

No, this one's not so famous, let's call her L. She's crazy into guys, in short, a nymphomaniac, she always has to bring guys home, she just can't do anything but. So, her husband—

The soup's sitting on the table in the tureen, the ladle's in it, everyone has to help themselves.

It's just like at a health spa, isn't it? Robert says. Sort of self-service. Interesting.

I wouldn't mind that it's like a health spa, Jarka says, she's already ladled the soup into the bowl and onto the spoon as well, but the soup's lukewarm! It's not hot at all. You should be punished for serving lukewarm soup.

Well, you know, when it's hot, it'll get cold, or you might have to blow on it for a while, but no one can do anything with soup that's lukewarm.

Everyone at the table is eating lukewarm beef soup; no one has to blow on it.

So tell us, Jarka, what's up with the husband? Ella wants to hear more of the story.

With what husband? Jarka's still on the beef soup and its lukewarmness.

Well, with the nymphomaniac's husband.

Oh, that! Well, it's simply awful. She just brings her suitors home, and her husband still gets up to open the door for them. He just opens the door and lets her and the suitor in and then goes to the kitchen.

That's the kind of story you tell when they bring lukewarm soup, Robert says, it's out of a *Reader's Digest*, but the story starts getting around that it happened to a neighbor.

It wasn't a neighbor that it happened to, but Fanda's classmate from elementary school. And I had to get it out of Fanda, my husband, who didn't want to tell me at all, but I had to find out what he and Pepa—that's the nymphomaniac's husband—were always trying to work out over beer. He, that is, Pepa, just tells him everything because they've known each other since elementary school. He says: I've even got an axe ready—I've got it behind the door and I tell myself: next time I open the door, I'll smash him with the axe. Right when the fucker shows up to screw his wife, he'll smash him with the axe. Only he's never done it, he just has the axe there behind the door, but he opens the door, lets the guy in, then goes back to the kitchen.

The lukewarm soup has been eaten, but the food's still nowhere to be seen. Robert, Ella and Jarka have to get back to the booths, the book fair is in full swing and books have to be sold, with the trade show discount, business is business. Robert, upon request, still manages to get in the description of the Grailist's funeral (no eulogist, just psycho music and an obese woman in flowing white robes floating on stage, perhaps imitating an angel, and on top of that the stench of incense, it just about made me puke!), but even then neither cauliflower nor chicken has arrived and they've really got to go, the trade show discount, business, there's nothing you can do. Robert heads to the counter, to the waitress and gives her a lecture: What kind of service is this, you should be happy that at least once a year you get a good turnaround here, otherwise no one would show up at this hole in the wall, so I'll pay you, at least, for the soup, even if, between you and me, it's for soup that not only wasn't hot, it wasn't even warm! It was barely lukewarm! We should be compensated for such soup, Miss, not have to still pay for it. And besides that you won't be getting any tip for your lousy service, no trinkgeld from us, which we know means Drink Money, Trink Geld, i.e., money for a drink, that we would otherwise have been glad to give you, so you could also buy a drink with your trinkgeld! But now there won't be any drink, miss, just a parched mouth. And does it even occur to you at all the amount of time we've wasted here over lukewarm soup waiting for cauliflower? All for nothing? I think not, Miss.