

Bohumil Hrabal

Rambling on: An Apprentice's Guide to the Gift of the Gab

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Short Stories

Bohumil Hrabal

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I dedicate this translation first and foremost to the memory of my good friend and fellow-translator of B. Hrabal James Naughton, who sadly died just weeks before this volume saw the light of day, and also to the memory another of our colleagues, Michael Henry Heim.

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*In a lightweight play one may find
some most serious truth.*

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz,
philosopher of the Late Baroque

Essential to playing is freedom.

Immanuel Kant,
philosopher of the Enlightenment

*When you're pissed, Kilimanjaro
might even be in Kersko.*

Josef Procházka,
roadmender and my friend

HAJENKA

ortrét v p



1 THE St BERNARD INN

WHENEVER I PASS Keeper's Lodge, a restaurant in the forest, I always see, lying there on the apron, the patio outside the entrance, where in summertime patrons sit at red tables and on red chairs, a huge, wise St Bernard dog, and the patrons either stepping over it, or, if they've ever been bitten by a dog, preferring to look away and walk round it, their peace of mind restored only after they've sat down inside the restaurant, but if the St Bernard were to be lying inside the restaurant, these timorous patrons would rather sit outside on the red chairs, even on a cold day. No St Bernard ever did lie here, and probably never will, but my St Bernard will lie there for as long as I live, and so the St Bernard and I, outside the Keeper's Lodge restaurant in the forest, we two are coupled wheelsets... It was way back when my brother got married and had a haulage business, driving his truck and taking things wherever anyone needed, but the time came when a private individual wasn't allowed to drive on his own account any more, and so my brother, his private company having been shut down, was out of a job. And

because he was jealous, so madly jealous that his wife wasn't allowed to have a job lest anyone else look at her, he suddenly got this weird idea that my sister-in-law's gorgeous figure couldn't be exploited anywhere better than in catering. And if catering, then it had to be the Keeper's Lodge forest restaurant. And if the Keeper's Lodge, then the place should be made into a real pub for lorry-drivers and foresters, locals and summer visitors. About that time, the manager's job at the Keeper's Lodge fell vacant and my brother did his utmost to make the restaurant his. And in the evening, he and Marta would sit for hours, and later on even lie in bed, weaving an image of an actual Keeper's Lodge, a fantasy restaurant whose décor they carried on planning even in their dreams or when half-asleep. When my cousin Heinrich Kocian heard about it, he's the one who'd risen highest in our family because he thought he was the illegitimate scion of Count Lánský von der Rose, wore a huntsman's buckskin jacket and a Tyrolean hat with a chamois brush and green ribbon, he turned up at once, drew a plan of the Keeper's Lodge restaurant and made a start on the décor with some rustic tables of lime wood, tables that he would scrub with sand once a week and with glass-paper once a year, around the tables he drew what the heavy rustic chairs would be like, and on the walls, which were decked with the antlers of roebuck and sika deer shot

long before by Prince Hohenlohe, the feudal lord of the line that had owned these forests for several centuries, he added a couple of wild boar trophies. And cousin Heinrich decided there and then that specialties of Czech cuisine would be served, classy dishes that would bring the punters in because out on the main road there'd be signboards with the legend: Three hundred metres from the junction, at the Keeper's Lodge, you can enjoy a mushroom and potato soup fit for a king, Oumyslovicé goulash or pot-roast beef with stout gravy. My brother and sister-in-law were over the moon and the Keeper's Lodge was like a padlock hanging from the sky on a golden chain. But even that was not enough for cousin Heinrich. He insisted that any decent restaurant should have a corner in the kitchen set aside specially for regulars and any other patrons worthy of the distinction. So he consented to purchase six baroque or rococo chairs and an art nouveau table, which would always have a clean cloth, and that was where the regulars and any guests of honour would sit. This rococo corner so excited my brother and sister-in-law that thereafter they wore blissful smiles and they would drive out every day to check on the painters' progress in the kitchen and dining area of the Keeper's Lodge, the painting jobs seeming to them to be taking an unconscionably long time and they wanted the painting completed overnight, as fast as their own

dream of the Keeper's Lodge had been. And when they saw all the outdoor seats lined up in the garden of the Keeper's Lodge under the band-stand, nothing could stop them having all those night-time visions and dreams of the garden restaurant by night, all the tables painted red, all the red chairs in place round the tables on the lawn, with wires strung between the oak trees and Chinese lanterns hanging from them, and a quartet playing discreetly and people dancing on the dance-floor, my brother pulling pints and the trainee waiter hired for Sundays serving the drinks in full French evening dress, and my sister-in-law would be making the Oumyslovic goulash and the pot-roast beef with stout gravy, and the patrons would be enjoying not just tripe soup but also the regal mushroom and potato soup. One day, cousin Heinrich Kocian turned up, joyfully waving the bill for the six chairs which he'd bought for a song, and when he and my brother went to have a look how the painting of the walls and ceilings of the Keeper's Lodge was progressing and when my brother confided that he'd further enhanced the woodland restaurant with a garden and dance floor, our cousin said that in this corner here there'd also be a barbecue smoker, where spiral salamis and sausages would be heated up and uncurl over hot coals and he himself would take charge of it at the weekends, despite being the illegitimate son of Count Lánský von

der Rose. And my brother and sister-in-law were happy, spending the happiest years of their marriage forever moving chairs around and manically seeking ways to make the restaurant even more beautiful and agreeable. And so it came to pass that when I heard about it and when I saw the Keeper's Lodge forest restaurant for myself, I said, or rather casually let drop, that what the kind of beautiful restaurant that my brother and his wife wanted to create out of this lonely building in the forest needed was a nice, big, well-behaved dog, a St Bernard, lying outside the entrance. And at that moment nobody spoke because cousin Heinrich was coming to the end of his story of how the Prince von Thurn und Taxis had taken him in his carriage, which had been waiting to collect him off the evening express, to his palace at Loučeň, and when the coachman jumped down from his box to open the door, the prince exclaimed: 'Johan, you're barefoot! You've drunk your boots away!' And the coachman explained tearfully that he'd had to wait so long for the later express that while he had indeed drunk away his boots at the pub by the station, he had salvaged the Prince's reputation by blackening his feet with boot polish... and as our cousin finished this story about his friend, the Prince von Thurn und Taxis, and having made it plain that when such important personages as the Prince von Thurn und Taxis are spoken of a respectful

silence is called for, he asked, though he'd heard full well, what I'd said. And I repeated that such a beautiful restaurant in the woods should have a well-behaved St Bernard lying outside the door. And my brother watched our cousin, as did my sister-in-law, almost fearful, but quite soon our cousin's face broadened into the smile he would smile as he envisioned the future, looking far ahead, and at the end of this vision lay St Bernard's very own St Bernard with its kindly furrowed brow, which thus became the final full-stop, indeed keystone of the entire conception of what the Keeper's Lodge restaurant in the woods was going to be like. At the admin headquarters of the Co-op, which the restaurant in the woods nominally belonged to, they had nothing against the young couple's interest in the place, saying they were even pleased because managers as well-versed in book-keeping as Marta were far to seek. And so our cousin fetched the six rococo chairs, my brother cleared a corner in their existing flat, cupboards pushed together, settee out into the corridor, and there and then, under the watchful gaze of cousin Heinrich Kocian, they set the chairs out as they were going to be in the Keeper's Lodge forest restaurant. And they put a cloth on the table and my brother opened a bottle of wine, and the glasses clinked in toasts to such a fine beginning, since there was no putting it off. And as Heinrich sat there in his Tyrolean hat,



one leg across the knee of the other, sprawled out, he started on about the time when, following Prince Hohenlohe, Baron Hiross became the owner of the forest range within which the Keeper's Lodge lay, and how one day he'd been staying with him and had personally bagged a moufflon at the upper end of Kersko, at a spot called Deer's Ears. "But that gamekeeper Klohna!" cousin Heinrich started to shout, "the tricks he played on the baron! I'm sure you know that aristocrats, when their gun dog gets too old, they just do away with it! And so the baron gave the word for his setter to be disposed of and Klohna duly shot it. But the dog was a handsome beast and the gamekeeper fancied it and duly skinned it. And after he'd cut off its head and buried it along with the skin, the landlord of the restaurant on the Eichelburg estate, close to where there's that sawmill, near where the Kersko range ends, where there used to be that spa where Mozart once took a bathe, the landlord asks, 'What's that hanging there?' And the gamekeeper said it was a moufflon. So having given him two thousand for it – it was early on during the Protectorate – the landlord marinated the moufflon and because I was visiting Baron Hiross along with a number of aristocrats, he, the Baron, booked a sumptuous dinner at that restaurant on his estate, which specialised in game dishes, and sumptuous it was; for starters: salpicón, turtle soup, and I've never ever tast-

ed such fantastic sirloin as on that occasion,” cousin Heinrich said, sipping his wine and smoothing the tablecloth... and my brother and sister-in-law envisaged this corner in the Keeper’s Lodge and looked forward to having cousin Heinrich there to hold forth and divert the regulars and the better class of patrons... “...but when the Baron came to pay, and he paid sixty thousand, because afterwards we drank only champagne and cognac, we all asked what kind of sirloin it had been, and the landlord said it was moufflon. And then they conveyed us to our various homes near-dead, because in aristocratic circles it is the done thing to render oneself unconscious with the aid of champagne and cognac, and Baron Hiross at once leapt into his britschka and careered off back to his gamekeeper’s cottage, where he started bellowing at the gamekeeper, the latter in his long johns, having already gone to bed: ‘Klohna, you’ve got poachers, d’you know what we’ve just feasted on? Moufflon! I’ll see you sacked!’ Baron Hiross ranted... and so Klohna had to get down on his knees, swearing that he was a faithful guardian of the forest, and that what they’d just feasted on wasn’t moufflon, but his lately shot gun dog... And Baron Hiross, just as the Prince von Thurn and Taxis had forgiven his coachman after the coachman had drunk away his working boots, the baron said: ‘So I’ve actually gorged myself on my own dog masquerading as moufflon and

paid for it twice over...” Then my cousin turned to the newspaper and my brother and sister-in-law buffed the arms of the chairs with polish to bring them up to such a fine shine that their image of the corner for regulars in the Keeper’s Lodge became one with reality. And suddenly cousin Heinrich whooped: “Right, mes enfants, here it is: *For sale: a St Bernard dog, to a good home only. Price negotiable. Gel.*” He stood up, pulled on his buckskin gloves with a small shot-hole in the top side and said: “I’m off to get that St Bernard. If the corner with its baroque chairs is ready and waiting, let’s have the St Bernard ready and waiting as well.” Next day, my brother and sister-in-law not having slept that night, cousin Heinrich Kocian arrived, and that he was a very small cousin we knew – whenever he was about to eat a frankfurter, it would hang down to his knees before he’d taken the first bite – and so from a distance it looked as if he was leading a small cow. When he reached the house, my brother thought he was leading a big calf, a young bullock. But it was the St Bernard. “Six hundred crowns he cost, the owner’s a writer!” he shouted excitedly, “and he’s called Nels! The author’s name’s Gel!” Nels was a handsome beast with a washing-line round his neck, secured with the writer’s dressing-gown cord, and the dog instantly made himself at home, lying down on the cement floor to cool off, and the way he lay there was exactly as if he were

practising for how he was going to lie outside the entrance to the Keeper's Lodge restaurant. And cousin Heinrich sat down on a rococo chair, legs crossed, in his Tyrolean hat, and with one sleeve rolled slightly back he reported how the writer had made him welcome and explained that the main reason he was selling the dog was because he loved him, but Nels loved his young wife much more, so whenever he laid a hand on her, the dog would bowl him over and growl into his face, so he had grown into a disturber of conjugal bliss, and that was why he was selling him. And he had immediately handed over the dog's pedigree and here it all was: Nels was famous, a descendant of the short-haired St Bernards of the St Gothard Pass and his father was thrice best of breed at the Swiss national dog show, and his mother had come from the St Gothard hospice itself... And cousin Heinrich added the dressing-gown cord to the bill, because Nels had grown up indoors and so in lieu of a lead Mr Gel the writer had let him have the dressing-gown cord for the journey. And then Heinrich left and Nels remained in the house. And so the day came when my brother and sister-in-law went to the Co-op offices to pick up their deed of appointment to the Keeper's Lodge inn in the forest range of Kersko. But the manager told them that, regrettably, the licensee who had been at the inn before had had second thoughts and decided to stay on, but



that there was a pub that had come vacant at Chleby, so that was the deed they were getting. The beautiful lantern-lit garden, the bright lights of the restaurant with its limewood tables and heavy rustic chairs, its corner for regulars with its baroque chairs, all that was extinguished, as if some malevolent magician had hauled it away somewhere on a circus trailer, including the St Bernard, who, along with the chairs, remained the only living evidence that it hadn't been a daydream, but a snippet of reality, one sector of a beautiful circle, one degree on the basis of which, with a bit of imagination, a circle might have been described. Nels, the St Bernard, was a crumb of the Host in which was the whole Christ. The inn at Chleby was a sorry place where living on the premises was impossible, so my brother and sister-in-law had to commute to it, the St Bernard would lie at my mother's feet and look fondly up into her eyes, and she was often caught not just talking to him, but lying on the carpet with the dog for a pillow. At Chleby, business was good, but for all that just business, the beer – and the goulash – were so good that workers coming home from their workplaces in town no longer went straight home, but sat around in the inn by the cemetery, drinking and eating until their money ran out, but my brother and sister-in-law were delighted that they'd turned the inn into a real pub, to the extent that finally the wives of the drinkers

of its Kolín beer joined forces and complained to the local authority that their menfolk were drinking all their money away and, even worse, had stopped coming home and taken up residence in the inn. So my brother had to get back behind the wheel and become a cab-driver, but he never stopped dreaming, what if the manager of the Keeper's Lodge restaurant in the Kersko forest range had a sudden heart attack, or if he got slightly run over by a car? But the manager enjoyed rude good health and although he would have gladly left, the knowledge that my brother was so keen on the restaurant, and on no other, gave him added strength and stamina. Cousin Heinrich Kocian came back just once. That was the time when my brother entered Nels in the national dog show in Prague, at the Velká Chuchle race-course. And Heinrich insisted that *he* would parade Nels. And so that day, in his Tyrolean hat and buckskin gloves, and his leather hunting jacket, he stood there holding Nels tight on a leather lead twisted round his wrist, because the writer, Mr Gel, had written *ex post* that Nels was not only extremely strong, but also vicious. However, the children had so humanised him that they would lead him at the muzzle, like a horse, put a bathing costume across his back and take him swimming, but he insisted on dragging them out of the water by their trunks, persisting in the belief that the children were drowning and he had to save them.

He was only vicious to tramps and postmen, and one time he dragged a postman delivering telegrams, along with his mailbag, into his kennel, where he munched up all the registered letters and three telegrams, though he left the postman unharmed except for tearing his uniform and covering him in saliva, it being his breed's fate to slaver a lot, and whenever he shook his head, he spattered everyone and everything around with great gobbets of spit. In short he was a purveyor of showers. When our cousin saw that he and Nels were being filmed, he was on cloud nine. And he started spinning yarns to my brother, because such a glorious environment called for it, with so many dogs and so many people about, so many foreigners who'd brought their dogs along to compete for some award, like Nels himself, some certificate in whatever category their dog was entered in. Once again, Heinrich Kocian was loud on the subject of the Prince von Thurn and Taxis, his friend, and his friend the Baron Hiross, and because the turn of the St Bernards was a long time coming, he went on with particular zest about how his friend, Prince Kinský, loved riding around in his carriage drawn by four black horses, who had to have white socks, and how one broker and horse-trader had supplied his friend Kinský with a pair of black horses with white socks and the prince had hitched them up right away and they'd careered off together from Chlumec to

Bydžov over flooded meadows, so the white socks got left behind in the flood water. And Count Kinský had told him, Heinrich, that he'd had the trader come over so he could give him a present, and he, damn fool that he was, came, and the Count's grooms grabbed him and shoved him up to his chest in a barrel filled with manure, "...and then, my friend," Count Kinský had said, "I took my sword and swung it at the horse-trader's neck and he ducked down into the manure, so I did it several times more and finally told the grooms to tip the manure out onto the compost heap along with the trader..." and the band was playing at the Chuchle race-course and dogs were barking and finally it was the turn of the St Bernards, and suddenly – Nels puckered his brow, the way he would so as to peer after objects a great distance away, as was ever the wont of his forebears, sitting up in the snow-covered mountains and peering after anything that might stir amid those august heights, and there at the end of the race-course was Mr Gel, the author, alighting from a bus with his young wife, and Nels spotted her and peered towards her and the young woman called out, from a half a mile away: "Nels!" And Nels saw that it was his mistress who he had been so fond of and he broke into a run, haring off to get to her as fast as he could, but my cousin Heinrich had the leather lead wrapped so firmly round his wrist that he had to run too, initially, but then Nels

pulled out all the stops and my cousin went flying through the air like a banner being pulled behind the dog, who was pelting along and getting his rear legs tangled in his ears, and Nels ran past the twelve tables where the judges were sitting in the sun, a hundred or more sworn experts on dog breeds and pedigrees, and experts on all a dog's pluses and minuses... and as cousin Heinrich flew over the tables, hauled along by the wrist of one hand, he just had time to raise his Tyrolean hat with his free hand and salute the dog show committee, though they were horrified at this strange apparition, and as cousin Heinrich shot through the air in the wake of Nels the St Bernard past the chairman of all the chairmen the latter gave vent to his disgust: "Outrageous! Not even lunchtime and some competitors are already drunk..." Nels meanwhile had reached his mistress, lain down on his back and presented her his underbelly so that she could kill him, the weakest spot on his body... Cousin Heinrich doffed his Tyrolean hat and introduced himself: "Heinrich Kocian, illegitimate son of Count Lánský von der Rose...", and he set about flicking off the grass and dust from his coat, then, grabbing himself by the elbow, he found that a hole had been worn right through the leather to his very skin. The young woman knelt down and lay her head on the head of the St Bernard and the two friends, the woman and the St Bernard, merged in a mystical

union, and the writer, Mr Gel, said: “Nels must weigh at least ninety kilos now and the strength of him, eh? He must have dragged you through the air a good hundred metres...,” and cousin Heinrich said: “What do you mean dragged? He was only obeying my command; once I did the same thing before the company at my friend the Prince von Thurn and Taxis’ place, only that time it was a Great Dane...” And Nels purred with delight and, as he lay there on his back, he cast sheep’s eyes up at his mistress and signalled to her with his paw that he wanted her to put her arms round him again, and again... But all that, including Nels, is now lost in the sands of time, though whenever I pass by the Keeper’s Lodge, that restaurant in the Kersko woods, I see a huge St Bernard lying on the little patio, the apron, lying there and watching and greeting the patrons and puckering his brow, and dreaming of quiet music playing in the abandoned and jumbled restaurant garden, of cloth-covered tables scattered about the lawn with the customers sitting at them on red chairs, chatting quietly and sipping beer and ordering pot-roast beef with stout gravy and Oumyslovce goulash...

2 A MOONLIT NIGHT

ALL OVER THE WORLD, wherever there's a chapel or a church there's a parish priest, everywhere in the world the parish priest has a university degree, and wherever in the world the rectory is home to a man with a university degree, he will have a command of Latin and his native tongue, and in his native tongue he will seek to have some influence on the citizenry entrusted to him and in Latin he will report to Rome any news that reaches him from his parishioners, and so every year, gathered together in Rome from all over the world, summary reports state how many murders there have been throughout the Christian world, how many adulteries, how many burglaries and robberies, how many people have had doubts about the Church's teachings and how many are in a state of apostasy or are lukewarm in their faith, and so I, police commandant in the area entrusted to me, I note that I'm not university educated, that the members of the National Committee aren't either, and that for now I must just do what I do, keeping a close watch on anything criminal going on on my patch, but, more than that, I try



by my own diligence in office to keep myself, the district, the region and even the Interior Ministry informed of what people are thinking, how they live their lives, and what they commit in the way of petty misdemeanours, from which it is only ever but one little step to bigger ones. Most of all, I like performing my duties within the Kersko forest range, a place close to my heart since childhood, a place where I know everyone, where as a boy I played or did battle, as a youth I chased the girls and gave and received many a bop on the nose or punch in the ribs, so I don't feel on duty here, more on a kind of holiday, so pleasant is it to be working in the place where I grew up, which is why it's such a pity that time passes so quickly in the day, and because, come the evening, I still haven't had enough and going to bed, well, that would be a sin, I stroll along the one metalled avenue through the trees of the Kersko woods, having left my Volga parked down a side track, and in the darkness I keep my ears to the ground to check who's about, who's talking to who, sometimes revealing my presence, sometimes just leaning quietly against the wing of my police Volga, and I rejoice in the beauty of outdoors and at the adventures the main road brings at night in the form of cyclists with and without lights, and driving quietly past Keeper's Lodge, I work out from the cars parked outside who's in there, who, as a driver, is drinking black coffee, and who's having a beer

or, horror of horrors, spirits. But when the moon rises over New Leas and the smells of the fields drift by on the breeze, that's when I'm truly happy to be on duty and I'm amazed that the State pays me for the privilege, that I have this uniform and that I am in command. Properly I ought to be paying for all these beautiful things out of my own pocket, so much is it like I'm on holiday, and so beautiful is night-time in the Kersko woods. But *I know*, vigilance, I have to be vigilant, because no one knows that crime never sleeps, and suddenly bang!, a shot, and there's a policeman lying in a pool of blood, several hundred of us have fallen, four hundred and thirty-six dead, and there's an end to gazing at the rising, beautiful red or yellow moon, and that is the mission I'm destined to pursue, watching and guarding the achievements of this young state of ours, this Party of ours. And so there are two conjoined centres in my brain, one that watches over and cherishes all that is beautiful in our society, and the other that enables me to enjoy the forest rides and clearings, the tracks that lead from one wood to the next across the fields that I love as if I were a farmer myself, because, even though on duty, I'll get out of my Volga and have this sudden urge to head for the fields, where in the spring I pick up a handful of soil and sniff it, and when the grain crops are ripening I take a stroll past the endless fields on the pretext of running a check and there

I stroke the ripening barley and wheat, sometimes plucking an ear and, like a farmer, rubbing the grains out into the palm of my hand, sniffing at them, smelling them and my nose, like an agronomist's, tells me that this very week the grain has come ripe and it's harvest time. Yet the most beautiful thing is still when you're in the forest and the moon is high, that moon gives me such a thrill, the rising moon, the moon rising? But a figure emerged from the light of the inn to be drenched in the shower of light cast from a street lamp, and it gathered up its bike and mounted it and rode quickly off, riding into the outline of itself as the moon pushed at its back, and I could tell at once that it was Joe, a childhood friend, but nowadays a prodigious consumer of beer and black coffee and rum, sometimes he has a certain charm, one day he got so drunk at lunchtime that he rode his bike onto some private land, he was still a roadmender back then, and my cousin had fallen asleep after lunch, it being so hot, and suddenly, in a daze, she thought she'd caught a whiff of beer and rum and coffee and there was Joe the roadmender, leaning over her and whispering "I nearly kissed you, my beauty", on another occasion, this time even before lunch, he careered onto some private land, into a half-dug trench where some weekend-cottage owners had been putting down a mains electricity cable, and he did a somersault and started shouting his mouth off: "Who

gave you permission to dig the road up, this is going to cost you, digging up a public right of way, where's your permit, I'm in charge of the roads round here!" And so, with no lights, Joe rode on, not even needing to peddle with the moon pushing at his back, and then towards New Leas the metalled road goes on and on downhill, not many people know that the road is a hundred and eighty-five metres above sea level and at New Leas it's only a hundred and seventy-seven, so there's a clear downward slope, the Kersko woods really forming a kind of shallow saucer, because the other side of New Leas the track rises again to the main road from Hradištko to Semice, to an elevation of a hundred and eighty-five metres above sea level, but Joe, he kept swerving to the ditch on the other side of the road and right back again – how come he still has the appetite for it? How come he's still quite with it? And I stepped out of the trees, but Joe was probably half-cut, he called out to me, that was ever his way, always, instead of a bell or a torch, calling out into the darkness: "Out of the way, folks, I'm going too fast to stop!" But I flashed my service torch twice and Joe hopped off his bike and says: "Good evening, me old pal!" And I says: "Where's your light?" and pointing to the Moon he says: "Up there!" I says: "Where is your headlight as required by the Highway Code?" "In me bag," said Joe and by the light of the moon he opened his bag and in it glinted a



carpenter's axe, and he took a nickel-plated torch out and switched it on, then put it back in his bag and says: "But I'm supposed to carry a light when there isn't enough light from elsewhere, and the Moon's shining, hell, a bright shining light, the Moon, damn' beautiful light, don't you think, Harry..." I says: "What's your name, sir, show me your papers..." and again he rifles about and offers his ID card to the light of my torch and I leafs through it and asks: "What is your name?" Joe looks at me, eyes full of reproach: "Don't tell me you don't recognise me, Harry!" I says: "What's your name?" He says, cleverly: "But you've got it right there." And that rattled me, because I could smell he reeked of beer and rum. I says: "Have you been drinking, sir?" And he bows to me and says: "I have, and I do and I will drink just as I've been drinking for as long as I can remember, d'you remember that time when a keg of beer fell off the back of a lorry at this 'ere bend and I 'id it under some branches and that night I shifted it into a cottage I 'ad the keys to? Then for a week the pair of us, we drank it together out of a litre glass and for a week we was pissed from daybreak on? And how my wife wanted to chuck me out, she said she was fed up of it an' it 'ad to stop?" I handed him his ID back and says: "That was then, but now I'm on duty, right? And what's the axe for?" Joe says: "You know I'm a carpenter, I do odd jobs, like." And I says: "And do you

have a license and pay tax?” Joe says: “Of course, I do, I pay my taxes...,” and he tottered and says: “Don’t you reckon that’s enough? Can I go now?” And I could tell he was going to fall into the ditch again, so I unscrewed one of his valves and tossed it over a hedge into an irrigation channel and the tyre let out a sigh and I decided: “Look here, Joe, you’re not as young as you used to be, you’d be better off on foot...” And Joe stood there speechless, I could see he wanted to say – and inside he was saying – ‘you filth, you bloody piece of filth, what a way to treat an old pal, you shitbag, what a way to treat a friend you’ve known since we were kids, what a way for one worker to treat another!’ But he said nothing, just set off, wheeling his bike with the vein on his forehead swelling with rage. And I stood there and watched him go, the Moon lifting so as to push him along by the shoulders. Joe’s shadow had shrunk, like when you look down on a cello or double base from above, and I wondered, had I done right by tossing his valve, or not? In the end, I decided I had been right to let his tyre down because, like a father, it was down to me to prevent an accident, so I wasn’t even surprised when I heard Joe calling back to me from the spring: “You should be ashamed o’ yourself, treatin’ a fellow worker like that!” And then I ran after him, took him by the shoulder and said: “And because you were riding without lights, I’m going to fine you fifty crowns, and