

Bohumil Hrabal

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

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

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,

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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

