



SOFT

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wo-men

Chapter 1

THE FOREST

“I was afraid that once you came here, you’d want to have sex in the woods. But I wanted to surprise you. I even wondered which one of my girlfriends I could ask to help me out.”

“Oh, we wouldn’t have made you do anything you didn’t want to do.”

“I know that. Still...”

Suddenly, a fox jumps right in front of our car. Before we can blink, its thick, fluffy tail disappears into the dense, rough, unmown grass by the road. We nearly ran over a roe deer just before that, followed by a close call with two stray dogs on the edge of the village. And we’d only picked up the car in Krakow a couple hours earlier. It was late July, and the southern Polish countryside was bursting with heat but getting steadily colder as we drove east. The wind clawed at our necks with icy fingers. The summer seemed intent on departing Podkarpackie Voivodeship as fast as possible.

Last fall, I was lecturing in Warsaw and decided to visit the Museum of Modern Art on the Vistula. Browsing the museum bookstore, I unerringly picked up a book with the promising title *Seks w wielkim lesie* and devoured it before my plane even landed back in Prague. The slim volume describing ways to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh in nature was written by Łukasz Łuczaj, a botanist professor at University of Rzeszów who specializes in edible plants and insects: a free thinker and believer in energies – a true Renaissance man who can talk about food and plants in multiple languages, including Chinese.

“As a biologist, I spend so much time among plants that it sometimes makes me feel like a Greek god. My friends often tease

me about it, telling me I must be the incarnation of Pan – and perhaps I am. My life is full of joy: roaming the woods in search of plants to study; giving talks about the uses of plants; having romantic encounters. I always go where there is beauty to be found; it makes me feel connected to nature.”

“Do you consider yourself to be a kind of plant, then?” – “That’s an interesting question.”

Even before my plane landed at the Prague Airport, I knew what I wanted. Reading Łukasz’s book made me want to roam the woods, fields and meadows with him. “My book has many layers – spiritual, ecological, practical, and pornographic,” Łukasz explains. “Just like the forest can be many different things: a collection of plants, an edible garden, a piece of land, or a sacred grove.”

I have barely known Łukasz a few hours, and yet here we are, on the banks of a small lake, taking our clothes off. We have to wade to the other side, where the water is deeper and free of vegetation so you can swim. “Having sex in the water is not exactly comfortable,” Łukasz explains. “It may look good in movies but it’s not much fun. But,” he adds, “the shallow water may provide a good pretext. A woman once undressed here to swim – and to seduce me. I couldn’t do it, though. I wasn’t single at the time. This lake is a good place for romantic encounters though. That has been proven upon many an occasion.”

Wasps are attacking the apple I have been biting into. “There are fish in the pond, but also snakes and leeches. Still want to take that swim?” Łukasz said. When we were little, we would jump into any old puddle. Now we are spoiled and prefer swimming pools. “My lake is perfectly safe. It’s not too deep. The water never goes over your head, even in the deepest parts. I cleared the bottom so there are no branches to get snagged on.”

The water is tempting. I can still recall the feeling of a fish brushing up against me when I was a little girl. It was fascinating. “If you want to go for a swim, I’ll join you,” Łukasz offers. “Okay,” I concede. “But you go first. That’ll scare off all the snakes and frogs.” I turn to Hervé. “What about you? Want to join us?” Hervé

hates the cold. I know exactly what his answer will be. “I can’t right now. I’m taking pictures of the butterflies. Plus, we need *someone* to make it through this project.”

Dragonflies have begun to descend on the small pool.

“Are we skinny-dipping?” comes a tentative question. “Of course! We have to! It’ll be like a little ritual, for our book!” I exclaim joyfully and take off my shoes. There’s a sense of relief in shedding my inhibitions.

With cautious steps, I enter the little lake. The ground near the bank is soft and oozy. “Is it cold?” Hervé asks. “No, actually, the water is quite warm. It’s just a bit slippery, and sinking my feet into the mud feels a little weird.”

“Don’t worry if you happen to step on something that feels kind of sharp. It’s just water caltrop. The fruit is also known as a water chestnuts. Two more weeks, and they will actually be ripe enough to eat.” Łukasz hands me a spiky black fruit that he fished out from the bottom of the pool. It looks like a work of art. “They once used these to make rosaries in northern Italy. But they would also make fun BDSM toys, don’t you think? Here, keep this one. Some of these plants like to stick to pubic hair. You could model the look for your book.”

I feel around for the water chestnuts with my foot and pick them up with my toes to examine them. Such beautiful, featherlight things! What a great find!

Once submerged, we get attacked by arrowheads, aquatic plants with tiny white flowers. Their leaves and stalks cling to our bodies and wrap around our limbs, refusing to let go. “The bulbs are edible, too.”

The water on the other side is noticeably cooler, untouched by the sun. With every step, my feet sink into the mud, bubbles floating up to the surface. I try to swim a few strokes. Our movements have clouded the water, yet the arrowheads remain undisturbed, their heads still sticking up above the surface. The cold water makes me gasp for breath. We have only been in the water for a moment, and yet we have been here for an eternity. I don’t want

to go back to the world out there. The water grows warmer as I reach the shallow end, as does the mud rising between my toes with every step. I walk out of the small lake into the warm sun and the lens of Hervé's camera. My body is covered from head to toe in dark silt from the water. Suddenly you can see how much body hair I have; the triangle between my legs has gone black, as the once almost invisible hair has become prominent. Łukasz laughs. "No one would believe that you didn't swim now." Hervé studies my appearance thoughtfully. "You remind me of Millais's Ophelia. A young woman in the water, dead."

"Or an ancient Greek naiad," Łukasz chips in.

I try to dry myself with Hervé's shirt. "You look like a prehistoric woman. It's almost scary," Hervé says with a shudder.

"But it's kind of clean dirt if it comes from the water, isn't it?" Arrowhead seeds cling to my mound. "See? I told you they would do that. That's why I hate when people shave everything these days," Łukasz mumbles. "I know! It's because hairless bodies can't spread seeds," I say with a laugh, quoting what I read in Łukasz's book.

Under the tropical sun, the Chao Phraya River appears almost milky white. Its banks, reinforced with concrete to contain the river during floods, are overgrown with lush green vines. Tiny lanterns strain against their small green cages, ready to burst open and scatter their seeds far and wide. Yellow flowers spill from the endless hedges surrounding the riverbed. The landscape is suffused with scents. The Chao Phraya once used to be an important thoroughfare. Today, it is mostly long cargo boats that float down the river, transporting sand. The surrounding countryside is dusty, and sand has overtaken the rice fields. The river is being smothered by huge mats of water hyacinths. Native to the Amazon, this invasive aquatic plant was introduced to the Thai royal palace from Indonesia in the early 20th century, and has

since become a scourge of Asian rivers. Birds alight on the floating green islands to catch a ride downriver.

Pa Mok village is located about a hundred kilometers away from Bangkok. The family of Thai artist Cine owns a two-hundred-year-old farmstead there that is still partially occupied. When Cine was a little girl, she used to jump into the swollen river right from the terrace of their stilted wooden house during the floods. Back then, the river water was still clean. The house is surrounded by mango and papaya trees. The fruit in season now, but the yellow mangoes still need some time to ripen; they are sour and crispy right now. Wearing an old, wide-brimmed straw hat, Cine's aunt uses a long-handled fruit picker to get mangoes for us right off a tall, slim mango tree in the backyard. We keep three of the mangoes and only eat them a week later, back in Prague. The backyard extends into a garden, so densely overgrown that it resembles a forest. Little do we know, this is the last time we will have the chance to enter it. The following August, Cine's family will decide to clear the entire area to start growing durian trees. Cine sends us a message: "It's certainly better for the family living here to cut down the self-seeded trees and only tend to the grown ones; but I'm incredibly sad to see my mysterious forest gone forever." An old iron gate leads to a verdant tropical world. Right past the gate, you have to step over a fallen bamboo tree, bright green and wonderfully smooth, yet too narrow to even try to sit on. We cross the sun-scorched clearing, the low grass crunching under our feet, and immerse ourselves in our own private tropical forest. Safe. Naked. Walking freely around this sunny afternoon. At one point, we are startled by a large, fat, flightless bird. We hear its heavy, thudding steps in the dense, green underbrush. The cumbersome movement in the bushes suggests considerable bulk. I startle, imagining all kinds of scary things; but Hervé and Cine, who came with us, try to calm me down. "It could have been a turkey. Or maybe a stray dog." Stray animals are everywhere in Thailand. We are wearing nothing but our shoes so we wouldn't get hurt walking through the unknown terrain. I can't help but laugh: if something were to happen to us, how would we explain to the locals why we were naked? Suddenly, our light-skinned,

bare bodies with nothing but sandals on our feet seem hilarious. We start laughing like loons.

I also get to take my panties off in the woods of southern Europe. A true French revolution!

“Do you ever like to walk around naked?” we ask Łukasz. “I used to do it almost every day, but not so much anymore. Nobody really comes to these woods. I do need to keep an eye out during mushroom-picking season, though. Mushroom hunters are more likely to come out early in the morning or evening. My land is pretty far from the hiking trails, but sometimes a family does wander in. In early summer or during a warm spell in November, though, I am completely safe here. I can do whatever I want. Walking around the forest naked is liberating. Pants and skirts are so restrictive; they disrupt our integrity and the flow of energy from your feet up into your head.”

There is a certain vulnerability to nudity, but also a kind of strength. The forest has been planted, fairly haphazardly, by Cine’s grandmother. When she was a little girl, Cine liked to play here with her grandmother’s dogs, running through the tiny bamboo stalks. Those little shoots are now over twenty meters tall and a good ten meters in circumference. The woods are like a house: we push apart the tropical thickets, and it is like opening a door with squeaky hinges. We enter carefully, avoiding the well-trodden, cleared paths; instead, we go wherever we sense something beautiful ahead, letting the forest’s manifold fingers brush against us. We find several cozy nests – some made by animals, others created through the slow work of various plants, trees and bushes. Surrounded by creeping vines and lined with soft, dry fallen leaves, the nests resemble small hutches that you can sit in – if only for a while, considering they are swarming with insects, mostly ants. The ground is strewn with large, white, empty snail shells. I press one of the white gem-like shells to my body. Walking naked through the woods and being occasionally spotted, like an

illusion caused by shimmering hot air, is the most delightful sexual fantasy. Hervé and I disappear among the vegetation, and it takes only a fraction of a second before we are dripping with sweat, as if someone had poured a bucket of sticky, salty water over us. Cine follows behind with her camera, trying to stay invisible while tracing our steps. It's not that hard to spot us. I am whiter than white, white like the snail shells on the ground, standing out from the landscape.

Chapter 2

THE LOCK

Part 1

First, Walter puts a metal bracelet on my wrist, coated in rubber on the inside to make it feel softer. Metal spikes run across the back of my hand, ending in five finger covers. My hand now resembles something from a Robocop movie. The metal tubes covering my fingers have tiny holes drilled into them for ventilation. If my fingers got too sweaty and swelled up, I might never be able to get them out again. The feelings the contraption evokes in me are anything but blissful. "It looks *very* impressive, though," Hervé comments, pointing his camera at me. Walter eventually frees me from the bracelet, only to put huge, heavy, fingerless metal balls on my hands, forcing me to keep them clenched in fists. I am now completely powerless – unless I wanted to knock someone's teeth out; *that* I could probably do. "We need to immobilize your hands so you won't hurt anyone," Walter says, producing a gambrel-like contraption. The top part goes around my neck with loops attached around my shoulders and ankles. I am now in full BDSM gear, hogtied and unable to move. "This is too much for me," I say. Through the window, I catch a glimpse of Walter's wife walking through the garden.

Back in Prague, Hervé is working on his laptop in the living room, completely focused. I sneak into the next room, pull a box out from under the table, and take out the chastity belt. I giggle to

myself. It's both a childish game and a serious matter. I know Hervé will be surprised. He always softens, almost lovingly, throbbing with adrenalin at the same time. I like the ambivalence of it. The heavy, massive belt is like a prison. It has been waiting in the box these past two months after Hervé fell from a horse. When I show him the belt, Hervé laughs. "It's a good thing you didn't decide to put it on me this morning before I went swimming. I could have drowned."

We've got it figured out by now. With plenty of lubricant, getting into the contraption is easy enough. Then, Hervé lies his back and uses two fingers to move the latch on the front section upward. He waits until I manage to put both the left and right side of the belt inside the openings in the cage, aligning them carefully so that the whole thing shuts just right. And then I simply turn the key in the lock and hide it in a secret yet accessible location, until such a time when it will be needed again. When exactly that will be is never certain.

The last time I tried to get Hervé out of the chastity belt was very dramatic. He had collapsed, and we were waiting for the ambulance, worried that the belt might be damaged. That's why we now always test the locking mechanism before putting the belt on: we need to be absolutely sure that we can both close and open the lock safely. If Hervé ever got stuck in the belt, we would have to hop on the direct train from Prague to Antwerp and go to Belgium to see Walter. He would take us to his Carrara Design workshop and use an angle grinder to free Hervé. Googling said tool has been a mistake.

Chapter 3

THE AVATAR

Part 1

Hervé and I run across a busy intersection in Tokyo's Shinjuku district. Wrapped in billboards, the skyscrapers flicker and blink,

like hungry jukeboxes and slot machines, already tempting the greedy passers-by, even though it's not yet eleven in the morning. I shake my head at a giant, yawning, three-dimensional cat that occupies a screen stretching across several stories of a building near the subway station, watched by the ever-shifting crowd waiting for the light to turn green.

We first meet Hideka in the gallery that represents her – and it's a perfect match. Her eyes light up at the first mention of *costumes*. Hideka's English is not great, so we ask the gallery curator to interpret for us. I keep apologizing to the curator for the intimate topics we're discussing, but she looks like she's used to it – or maybe she's just a consummate professional. She doesn't bat an eyelid the whole time.

Hideka tells us about love hotels in Shinjuku where people can walk around naked and spy on other guests through peepholes; and about women in brothels who insert cameras into their vaginas. "There have been raids, however, and the police have shut some of those places down." She talks about women wearing leggings but no underwear; about delivery sex workers; about hotels where erotic costumes are included in the room rental – used ones, of course. She tells us about a sex worker she once met, and the amount of trauma the woman encountered in her work: one client, for example, always wanted her to tape his mouth shut; it was a fetish that reminded him of a teacher who had once abused him. "Fetishes sometimes make people confused," Hideka explains. "When a fetish is linked to trauma, it always equates emotions with sex, nothing more." She mentions the erotic supermarkets in Shinjuku, Shibuya, and Akihabara. "There are always weirdos lurking about. It's like entering a sandstorm – you'd better be ready and brace yourself." She describes maid cafés, where waitresses treat customers dressed in elaborate maid costumes. We see them all around Shinjuku, especially in the evening, handing out flyers to entice prospective patrons, often among tourists. The young women wear various cosplay and anime costumes; most frequently, they sport outfits

based on the uniforms worn by French or Victorian maids. Their faces, framed by dark hair or colorful wigs, all look practically identical: fake eyelashes, Lolita-like makeup, cute smiles. It makes me sad. I am overwhelmed by all the noise and light smog.

Out on the street, we turn to Google Translate for help, and follow Hideka as she pulls us into the maze of narrow alleys in the department store. We are looking for a very specific erotic costume: one that is feminist, inclusive, and non-patriarchal; one that does not perpetuate hurtful stereotypes and does not denigrate or ridicule anyone. One that would make me feel strong. I want to turn myself into an avatar.

Part 3

After spending six hours in a cold, dank garage in the basement of a Kyiv hotel that serves as an improvised bomb shelter, the wait becomes unbearable. I eat breakfast at the hotel restaurant, the same meal I've had for several days now – scrambled eggs, pickled beets, butter, mozzarella cheese, and orange juice. Repeating this routine helps me stay calm. I realize that I am not as resilient as I thought. Despite the air raid alert, I take a shower to warm up a little, and snuggle up in bed for a while. I watch the Ukrainian flag fluttering on the building across the street and keep checking my phone. It's 10 a.m., and I was supposed to be at Halya's studio near the Saint Sophia Cathedral by now, getting ready to record an interview with Serhii. But things keep changing at the last minute. An hour later, the Russian rockets finally stop, and I send a quick text to Serhii: "On my way. Pick you up in a bit." Only twenty minutes have passed since the last airstrike, yet the stairs to the Kyiv Circus are already crowded with children holding their parents' hands. The show will start in a few minutes.

I place the beautiful leather mask on the table in the largest room of our Letná apartment so I can see it whenever I look up. It's an extremely personal artifact. Slava, a Ukrainian publisher, brought it to me a few weeks ago from heavily bombed Kharkiv. That night,

we treat the plants in the room to get rid of thrips, and keep out of the room for the next three days until it airs out. Whenever I come in to open or close the window, I smell a slightly cloying aroma. After we start using the room again, I ask anyone who comes in, “Can you smell that? Could it be the biological agent we used to treat the monstera?” They all shake their heads and say can’t smell anything. Maybe I’m taking my hypersensitivity to extremes. As I work on finishing this chapter, I put the mask right next to my laptop and finally realize it’s the mask I’ve been smelling all along. A few days ago, I wore it for an extended period during a photo session with Dita Pepe – long enough to start feeling mildly sick. I was wearing a lot of layers – Dita’s interpretation of nudity and concealment. My heart was suddenly racing in my chest, and I had to sit down and drink a glass of water. In that intense moment, the leathery smell of the mask imprinted itself on me to the point of drowning out all other smells. It makes my heart clench. The slightly sweet scent is a composite of all the women who have worn the mask before me.

I first learn about Serhii from Nadja, a Ukrainian artist who lives in Paris. Serhii is a talented artist from Kharkiv who creates surreal, utopian, and post-punk leather masks, attracting fetishists, artists, performers, photographers and art collectors alike. “You really need to meet Bob Basset for that pleasure book of yours!” she exclaims. At a café near Place de la République, she shows me Serhii’s impressive portfolio of wearable pieces, created under the pseudonym Bob Basset. It even includes extremely realistic horses’ heads. I email him the same day. “I’m going to be in Ukraine in late May, early July. I would like to meet with you. But not in Kharkiv – I like myself too much for that. Do you think you could take a trip to Kyiv? I’d like to invite you to collaborate with me on a book about sexual pleasure.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t ask me because of my collab with Givenchy,” Serhii laughs. He is boisterous but friendly, with the kind of expansive energy that will magically suck you in. He has strabismus, which causes his eyes to wander in all directions. The first time I can really look him in the eye is two hours later, when he covers his right eye with one of his masks. “Some people think

it makes me look like a pirate. Sometimes I put a pendant with a 17th-century gold coin round my neck. It makes me feel very romantic: I always imagine a Spanish galleon attacked by a crew of Dutch pirates who steal all its gold.” Serhii is imposing, charismatic, beautiful. I haven’t met many people like him in my life. We are waiting for Halya to come pick us up in a taxi. At first we can’t find each other amid the tall Kyiv buildings. We are saved by a human billboard promoting Ukrainian dumplings that we both follow. I am far more interested in Serhii than in some fancy fashion brand. I have read so much about him; I find both his work and his persona fascinating. I was extremely impressed by his project of making masks for Ukrainian soldiers who had suffered horrific head injuries on the front. This deeply human gesture was yet another reason why I wanted to get to know him. “When you look at my Mask of Maidan (*it looks like a police baton smashing the wearer’s face*) or at my war masks, they will tell you everything about who I really am. Anything an artist does with love reflects his personality.” It is for Serhii that I stay in Kyiv a few days longer than I planned, despite the ongoing war.

Chapter 6

SAFE SPACE

Hervé says Bangkok is like a fast-food joint, except instead of selling food, it sells sex. Every night, I go swimming, using the precise, mechanical strokes of the front crawl to scrape off the sweaty life that has stuck to me out in the streets, to wash the noise, voices and shouts out of my ears, along with the ever-present looks, stares and leers. The streets of Bangkok are a permanent hunting ground. Hundreds of people selling their own bodies, fake impotence cures and socks eagerly wait to catch your eye and make a bit of profit. Someone is always offering us something; but I’ve had enough. This constant visual scanning has a single-minded purpose: to determine where you belong, why you are here, what you want, and what we can offer you. Are you

looking for the same thing as I am? Maybe you've only come to do a bit of diving, or maybe you're just waiting for a plane home.

A thin, young woman, her bare arms and calves deeply tanned, sits by the Asok train station, crying her heart out. Is she crying because she's hungry and no one wants to buy her body? Or does she simply feel terribly alone, abandoned, forgotten, invisible? Slumped on a stool by the path under a bridge arch, she waits for who knows what. The noise and smog from the countless cars and motorcycles, moving lazily along the crowded street, must have made her completely deaf. Life in Bangkok, especially in the Sukhumvit district, is divided into several levels, bisected by the Skytrain tracks. Looking from the platform down at the streets below is like looking at swarming insects. The upper levels are much less noisy and smelly. Going down a few steps from the platform, however, is like a punch to the gut – almost strong enough to make your heart stop. Young prostitutes sit huddled on the ground, next to mothers with their children, begging for money, the little ones holding out their hands alongside their mothers. Abandoned wretches with bodily deformities sit under the flickering neon lights of brothel signs and boxing match advertisements. But how many layers are there, really? How many more that we can't even see? Something happens on almost every step. I cry myself to sleep nearly every night. To me, Bangkok feels like a swamp of tormented souls. There may be far more unhappy people in the world than happy ones, Hervé observes. If I had been born here, what would I be doing now? With my head underwater, moving my arms in crawl strokes, I realize that writing a joyful report on sexual pleasure in Bangkok is extremely difficult. "I can't imagine recording anything even remotely nice or intimate in this city," I write to Chalan. I feel so unjustly privileged that I'm almost ashamed – that I was allowed to go to school, that I've always had a place to live, that none of my partners have abused me.

Chapter 8

TOUCH

Part 2

I've always had a secret dream of becoming a slippery fish. And now, our two naked bodies are covered in bluish, scented oil and illuminated by red and yellow vintage lamps as we slowly flop around on stage. I slide down Hervé's glistening back, my smooth, scaleless fish belly slipping further down on the plastic sheet until Hervé's hand stops me. The script tells us to become one. A warm, half-forgotten, childish joy, tinged with stubborn defiance, spreads through my abdomen: I want more of this! The stage floor feels cold on my back as if I am sliding on ice. Soon, however, my movement takes me back to the warmth of Hervé's body. I turn under his arm a few times, like a well-oiled cog in a music box, propelling a ballerina in a pink pleated dress. Today, it's us who are the dancers, and we are not wearing anything at all; and instead of a twee melody, we dance to David Lang's hymns. The theater is completely empty, except for one compassionate lady in the audience. There will be two of them at the repeat performance.

The stage is covered with plastic sheets. My stomach cramps painfully. During my period, I often clench up instead of giving in to the pain and letting it ravage me until the pain meds kick in. My first assignment of the day is to listen to the sound of the sea – that's what it feels like, at least. Hervé takes off his socks and walks across the stage, making a squelching sound as the plastic clings to the soles of his feet and falls down again. Cold and cramping, I am wearing two pairs of thick socks that slide smoothly on the plastic. I am instantly submerged in the sea, listening to the murmuring waves, feeling an imaginary pebble with my toes, playing with the water. Hervé's footsteps make it difficult for me to hear the sea, so I crouch down and turn my head this way and that to catch the faint sound waves. Miřenka is trying to teach us various breathing techniques. At one point, we expel our breath in a nearly voiceless scream, pushing out as hard

as we can, along with everything lodged deep within us. It's fascinating to hear a soundless stream of carbon dioxide coming out of someone else's mouth while experiencing it simultaneously. The whole time, I see a Voldemort-like face in front of me – is that me? I open my mouth as wide as I can, feeling the dry, chapped corners stretch to their limit, my lips soft as cream cheese. My eyeballs are trying to push through the eyelids locking them in, my forehead taut, a tight stream of air coming out of me, like a garden hose a second before water starts gushing out of its depths. Suddenly, I feel like a little prehistoric lizard, crouching on all fours close to the ground. My body thrashes from left to right, the plume of air twisting and turning my head. And then it's over.

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