

SHORT STORY

The Fern Flower

by J.B. Polk



"Hel" by Vanesa Erjavec

It was the last day of our holiday in Poland. We'd already visited Malbork, the biggest medieval castle in the world, and the Wolf's Lair, Hitler's bunker, when a place with a weird name popped up on the Google Maps.

"Hel Peninsula. Sounds fascinating! It's only half an hour's drive from here! Shall we go?" I said to Justyna, my wife.

"It's just a finger of land with nothing but dunes and trees. I'd rather go to Gdansk to see the Amber Museum," she shrugged noncommittally.

"Just imagine," I said dreamily, ignoring her lack of enthusiasm, "we could send our friends in Manchester a postcard saying: *Greetings from Hel!* And then tell everybody we've been to *Hel and back.*"

She snorted, showing she was not amused. After all, she was Polish, and used to puerile jokes about one of the prettiest holiday spots on the Baltic coast with an unfortunate name.

For me, it was the first trip to my wife's country of origin, and I was amazed by the language and the people who could speak and understand it. When Justyna, or any other Pole for that matter, pronounces a word, it sounds like they gargled drain cleaner. Don't get me wrong! I really admire a nation whose citizens, including some as young as three, can hold a conversation in the language, and some even write poems that win the Nobel Prize! But to my ears, it's nothing but a difficult *mélange* of consonants peppered here and there with a vowel. But to be fair, this is coming from a man who is absolutely monolingual, and when holidaying in Costa del Sol can only say: *'Otra tequila margarita por favor!'*

On our way to the Baltic coast we passed the medieval city of Grudzi?dz, which Justyna said used to be called Graudentium by the Teutonic Knights who settled there in the 14th century.

"You should have kept the name," I suggested but she scowled again.

A little further north we saw a village called Robin, which really bowled me over. I felt like jumping out of the car to stick pictures of Ben Affleck (the best man for the role!) in his Batman outfit on road signs. But Justyna got her nose completely out of joint and didn't even slow down.

It took a lot of begging and cajoling, but in the end, Justyna agreed to go with me to Hel.

"But I warn you, Bob," she said. "One more stupid joke, and you'll know what it means to go to hell!"

I believed her.

So, instead of blurting out anything that might annoy her further, I dove into Trip Advisor while my wife floored the accelerator and zoomed along the highway to Hel.

It took a lot of effort on my part not to Bluetooth the famous AC/DC song onto the radio (all the while humming silently: *Hey Satan, payin' my dues, look at me, I'm on the way to the promised land*) knowing damn well that if I did, Justyna would likely U-turn with a screech of the tires and the stink of burning rubber, and take us directly to Chopin airport in Warsaw. Believe me, I know my wife. Sometimes, one glance from her can freeze the heart in my chest. All it takes is one laser stare from her cornflower blue eyes for the temperature to drop to just below zero.

While she concentrated on the road, I learnt that the peninsula, only a 100 metres wide at the tip, was formed completely out of sand and got flooded by winter storms, which happened to be right now, as December sleet battered the car and everything around it with needlepoint sharpness.

If we are lucky, I thought, the peninsula will turn into an island, and we will be stuck!

I gritted my teeth, trying not to say something stupid like, *'Honey, I'd love to get stranded with you in Hel'*. But one look at Justyna's knitted eyebrows told me to keep my gob shut. I simply swallowed the chuckle wedged in my throat like a Lucky Tattie while the laughter stayed on the inside.

It was well past noon when we finally stopped in front of an ancient tavern. The sign above the door said: *Pod Zlota Wydma*, which Justyna explained meant *Under the Golden Dune*. It made sense because despite the sleet I could see a resplendent, mountain-sized heap of sand with a few pines sticking accusing fingers at the weepy sky.

As we entered, I noticed that although from the outside the tavern appeared medieval and spooky, inside, it was warm and welcoming, impregnated by the aromas of beef stewing in a spicy sauce, mulled wine, and old memories.

The man standing behind the bar looked as ancient as the tavern. He would have felt at ease in the *Prancing Pony*, drinking beer with Frodo and Pippin or fighting for The Precious with Sméagol.

Although it was already lunchtime, we were the only customers. It was apparent that there were better months for holidaying on the Baltic coast than December.

Pointing to me and then to one of the tables, Justyna said something to the man, which I hoped meant, *'We want to eat right now — even sooner, if possible'*.

“An English gentleman and his Polish wife,” the man answered in halting but correct English.

“You got yourself into a right pickle, young man.”

His turquoise eyes twinkled mischievously as he looked at Justyna, and I could swear I saw his bulbous nose twitch.

Justyna shot him a vexed glance, opened her mouth to retort something nasty but, considering his age, bit her tongue instead.

She ordered *zurek*, the humblest of all Polish soups and, at the same time, the most exotic. Made of fermented rye, it was usually served in a hollowed-out bread loaf with smoked meat and slices of sausage and egg halves floating on top. Heaven on earth, that dish. Especially in winter.

While we were waiting for our food I looked around. It was certainly better suited to another century — any time now, I expected a Teutonic Knight dressed in full armour, with a square helmet, the half-face guard shaped like a skull, to enter and ask for the way to the nearest crusade.

But it was not a knight who came in when the door opened. Instead, a tall and lanky young man entered. He was wearing nothing but a blue shirt, tattered jeans, and, despite the December cold, a pair of sandals. No socks. It was Roald Amundsen’s level of resilience when he tried to conquer the North Pole (no pun intended!).

Blonde dreadlocks hung over his lean, tense face, and his green, deep-set eyes darted rapidly from the counter to our table as if looking for someone. He was muttering something that, even to me, unversed in anything but English, didn’t sound like a human language.

The movement brought the tavern keeper back. In a flash, he approached the young man, said something to him in a soothing voice and, holding his left elbow, guided him into the kitchen. Before they disappeared, the young man issued a high-pitched screech and looked over his shoulder with fear.

A few minutes later, the innkeeper was back carrying a tray with two bowls of soup, slices of thick, brown bread, and mugs of steaming tea alongside a pot should we want a refill.

While he put the food on the table, Justyna said something in gun-rapid Polish. He nodded, then sat down opposite us and remained quiet for a moment as if some invisible wheels were turning in his head to help him find the correct words.

“So, who was the young man?” I asked.

“That’s our Stan — or Stanislaw,” the innkeeper answered.

“He was not always like that, you know. Crazy like. What is the other word for that? Oh yes, bonkers... It happened unexpectedly, about eight years ago,” he said quietly.

“Stan studied archaeology. Or anthropology. One of the things that don’t really get you a proper job apart from working in a library or a government office. He’s always been keen on local legends — especially the one about the Fern Flower.”

He poured more tea into our mugs. I heaped sugar into mine.

“The Fern Flower?” Justyna asked between sips of tea.

“Yes, the legend says that every St. John’s night, right behind this very tavern, a goodhearted man or woman can find the fern flower that blooms only once a year and only for a few seconds. As far as I know, ferns aren’t supposed to have flowers. But some lucky people say they have actually seen them. I don’t know if it’s true, but Stan believed it. He was so obsessed with the legend that he visited the wood on the dune every year. He thought the flower would reveal a secret so important that it would change the world forever.”

The old man paused for effect, looking at a distant spot on the ceiling as if searching for inspiration.

“Eight years ago, Stan came back from Warsaw, two days before St. John’s night. He got ready for his yearly trip, convinced that the flower would reveal the secret to him this time. Just before midnight, he walked to the woods and sat down to watch. The flower is supposed to glow in the dark, so he didn’t even dare to use his phone in case he missed the moment it bloomed.”

I finished the soup, drank all the tea, and listened attentively. It was more than I had bargained for. The unplanned trip to Hel came with goosebumps! I gazed at Justyna, who seemed as mesmerised as I.

“To cut a long story short,” the innkeeper continued, “Stan didn’t come back in the morning. Or the next day. In fact, he didn’t appear in the village for more than a week. His mother reported him missing, but the cops ignored her. Stan was known for his odd ways, and anyway, students come and go and hardly ever let anybody know where and for how long. No one wanted to make a fuss about it.”

“When he finally turned up ten days later, he was a changed man. His eyes were bloodshot. Half of his face was paralysed. He drooled and could barely talk.”

I saw Justyna's hand curl into a fist, a habit she had when she was excited or scared. I grabbed it to steady it in my own palm. It was icy cold, but gradually her fingers relaxed.

"The police took him to a hospital in Gdansk to find out what had happened and if he could remember anything. Two or three weeks later, he was back in the village, and he spoke for the first time — if you can call his gibberish speaking. And from what we could understand, he said he'd seen the Fern Flower and that it had revealed the secret to him."

"What was the secret?" my eyes nearly popped from expectation. "What did Stan see? What did he tell you?" I asked.

The old man stared at me for a long time, then pointed to my wife. "She knows..."

I turned back to Justyna, who was biting her lips, one hand clutching the table's edge, the other clasped to her chest, seemingly in agony.

"I can't," her voice was barely a squeak.

"Come on, tell me! How do you know? What did Stan say?" I urged.

I was unable to focus on anything apart from her contorted face.

"He said," she took a deep breath, "he said a holiday in Hel would be a holiday in Hel if it didn't come with a spooky story!"

She began to laugh.

I looked at her with bewilderment, then at the innkeeper and saw tears in his eyes. The old man was laughing. And Justyna's sides were splitting, too.

"I told you, young man. When you married a Polish woman, you got yourself into a right pickle," the innkeeper said, wiping his cheeks with the back of his wrinkled hand.

"Pickle or not," I answered, "with her as my wife, fun holidays are guaranteed for the rest of my life."

Justyna only smiled.