SHORT STORY

The Liars' Village

by Lindi Dedek



Illustration "It splits the time into quarters." by Lisa Hopf

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The gas station marks our weekly trips. It splits the time into quarters. When we stop there on Saturday morning, we'll need exactly three quarters of an hour to get to my grandma's house.

These mornings are filled with the pursuit of that weekend fantasy land, with grandma's grilled chicken, peach fruit stew and mashed potatoes. Unlimited TV time and VHS in the winter; garden playtime in the summer. It doesn't take much to persuade Dad to drive me to Grandma's every weekend.

When we leave our ugly town behind, with its factory chimneys and polluted Elbe, villages and villages emerge after every hill, one more boring than the next till we reach Lzovice, translated as the Liars' village, name origin unknown. It is where our weekend landmark stands.

The gas station is situated on a country road in the middle of nowhere in central Bohemia, too far from anything significant to give you a point of reference, it's the middle of the middle of nowhere.

For Lzovice and the nearby villages, the gas station serves many functions after the corner store and the pub closed down following the revolution. It's a cross-generational gathering club, a bar, and a grocery store for those in-between town trips, and an ice-cream parlor. Bearing little resemblance to any of the anonymous Shells, Arals or ESSOs that started to pop up like mushrooms in the recent years on the newly built highways, this gas-station is a proud enterprise of a local family. It was established in 1990, after the Iron Curtain fell and the country opened for new business.

We stop and I ask my dad how far it is. A gentle move on my side, as this was a question I know he knows the answer to. I stopped bothering to engage with him a while ago. I must have been about three years old when I found out that he wasn't generous in his attention. On one of the rare occasions when Mum assigned him with child-care, the two of us once played a memory game in the living room of our first flat. We were sitting on the scratchy, dark red Persian carpet. His melancholic look drifted from the little cartoon playing cards, designed by the Czech Bank to help kids learn English. Despite my encouraging hints as to which card he needed to turn so the Czech Sun could shine alongside the English one and the red Czech and English bike could ride together, he just couldn't care less. My obvious victory at the end of the game only left me annoyed.

The gas station Plihal & Plihalova is nothing more than a plain white cubicle with a glass front and four gas stands under a metal roof, with a surprising variety of stock. Cans of peas, pears and pasta slowly approach their due date. The gossip newspaper screams the headlines

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behind the shiny, overpriced Swiss chocolates. Crappy toys also approach a due date of a week after purchase. Last time I got a shiny turning wheel toy that broke down before we reached grandma's house.

The station's interior decoration consists of a microwave where you can heat up wiener sausages, with the mustard standing right next to the bread basket. Carefully arranged plants, mostly sansevieras, called mother-in-laws' tongues in Czech, have their sharp tongues sticking out in all directions. Plihalova waters the tongues every other day. She's a tall middle-aged woman with the unmistakably 90s mahogany hair color. Her husband Plihal is a large man in his late forties. His chestnut curls move further away from his forehead every time we see him. The couple is always up for a good chat with their customers, especially when served with a glass of wine. The Plihals curate an astonishing selection of wine for this area and era.

I realize that dad would buy me anything in the world or at least at the gas station, and I usually choose ice-cream. I adore the prickly, cactus-shaped one. I open my mouth wide and let it dissolve on my tongue for more of the sparkling effect, watching my dad and Plihal talking and drinking sparkling wine. Just five more minutes, Dad's soft voice promises, and Plihalova pats my head and nods. Sometimes she hands me a lollipop or a second ice-cream cone.

When Dad's in a good mood, he adds a newspaper for grandma. The relationship between him and his in-laws is getting more constricted with the success of his security camera business.

When we arrive at her house way past noontime, she's done reading the paper and tends to her garden (After her retirement, grandma built a pond with waterlilies in her garden and reads German paper in the mornings). Grandma shouts coffee! coffee! at dad as if she was a pizzeria server but he waves her offer off with the antennae of his new cellphone and drives away, I presume back to the gas station.

The gas station is where we get the guilt-plagued box of chocolate for my mum when my dad picks me up two hours too late again. My mum adores perfumes, makeup and fashion. No matter what she does, her makeup is intact and matches the color of her clothes and the new trends from *Harpers Bazar* or *Elle*. She came a long way from having only that one red lipstick per year smuggled from Western Germany. She doesn't need to press the color out till the last bit and break her lip over the sharp edge.

Her impressive display of scents and makeup boxes looks stunning on the marble shelves in the bathroom in our new house, each item telling us how often my father slipped or

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disappeared. My mum is excellent at painting happiness over her sad, resigned face. I love watching her precise remake ritual before she enters her dentist practice in the morning and the equally ceremonial facial removal in the evening.

The gas station is also where I get my gray-striped, plush cat. My parents remain resistant to my wish of a real pet so they let me have a stuffed dummy as a practice tool for kindness and care cultivation. I call the cat Liki, a fusion of my name and Japanese anime. I make her a hand-drawn birth certificate and for about three months Liki is a living animal to me until I start school, and can't take care of her any longer.

During the nineties, my parents and I become devoted students of the significance of gifts. We study their delicate powers of speaking to other humans - heart-to-heart - like no one else can. Their ability to communicate affection, attention, abuse; over the years establishing a special Morse code, that's not special at all: working late / flowers. Lashing out during lunch time / praline box. Getting carried away by someone's cleavage during your company summer party / taking your daughter to an aquapark. Not coming home from your company summer party / Dior's new perfume release.

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10 years later, it's the gas station where my best friend Jolanka and I have our first job, as window cleaners. We need to offer to clean the window shields of every driver who passes Lzovice.

Dad organized it. He says it pays well, even when only in tips, which we confirm to him, when he picks us up after the first shift. He lives in a world of fixed gender roles and conservative manners, so he informs us that with our first earnings we're supposed to buy presents for our parents. Jolanka and I have never heard of that tradition before, but we've also never had a job before. He chooses two Raffaelo packages in the station shop and two identical bouquets of gerbera daisies, and pays for them. We give them to our moms.

The rest of the summer of the window cleaning job feels like the rest of the summer in our town: dull with an occasional thrill. Some days, we score high bank notes without having to clean the car windows. On other days, we beat our day earning record, or the Tequila shots drinking record at a death metal festival in the village behind Lzovice. The fast cash dissolves any prejudice we might have held against this job.

One morning it starts pouring, just half an hour after Jolanka and I arrive at the gas station. We can't decide if we want to raincheck the shift or wish the rain away, when a mountain-biker emerges behind a hill. A short brown ponytail sticks out from under the helmet, a white shirt, baggy beige trousers. She looks about ten years older than us. She descends from her

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bike, and approaches us to ask in English about an accommodation nearby.

We sit down together at the wooden tables under the roof. She raises her eyebrows when we tell her about our job. Her eyes show amusement and concern at the same time. She's so different from Plihals' usual guests. Plihal and a small group of regulars come out of the shop and gather around us.

Jolanka and I become the translators between Lzovice and the world. We're not sure if we're more surprised that she's biking alone around the world or that she decided to stop at this gas station of all places. And how the hell did she get on a bike from Australia - she took a plane to China, she admits. She gives us her email address, globetrotter[a]something.australia, and leaves again, and I'd like to say that the sun comes out again but it doesn't.

Plihalova lets me paraphrase the conversation again and again. I glow with the possibility of adventures unthinkable an hour ago. What a dyke, Plihalova notes at one point. I ask how she picked this up, the biker didn't mention any partner. Exactly, her husband says. The local crowd laughs and Jolanka whispers let's go, the next train comes in 40 minutes. We hide in the corner and buy lemon tea from the drink machine with our train money.

Jolanka's dad, a journalist in a local radio and my drama teacher, chases the Australian biker for an interview the next day, but she's long gone.

Couple days later on a rainy day, I'm walking around town, my steps following the disoriented orders of my teenage head: I know neither where to go, nor what to think. I pass Jolanka's house but she's not in and Jolanka's dad insists on giving me a ride. He says he has to go somewhere, his destination as vague as mine.

In his car, he plays an *Easy English* tape, an unusual choice of tune. As we're driving through town, I wonder if it'd be faster to walk. He keeps talking, he keeps shouting; I can't quite follow his stories. I ask myself if the beer bottles under my seat have something to do with his voice.

At one point he says my dad should take care of himself and I wonder what sort of question is that. Then he stops the car in front of the old men pub, much-older-men pub; the white hair or bald men pub, on the main street across from my parents' house. I leave the car and my confusion leaves the car with me.

I call my dad and when he doesn't pick up, I try the gas station. He's coming home soon, Plihal tells me, but he isn't. I hide behind my rooftop room window and observe the calm street.

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When I see Jolanka's dad finally leaving the pub, his legs spin into each other like a pretzel, his arms twist around someone's neck. And that someone is my mother.

The affair leaks out in a telenovela fashion the first week of school. Jolanka and I are at the drama club and act in Genet's *Maids* under the direction of her dad. After the performance, Jolanka's mum comes to my mum and crosses her arms. She points to Jolanka and her husband and says, this is my husband. This is my family. I want you to see us this way. Where's your husband? I will make sure he comes next time if you don't.

My mum looks right through her and we leave. I propose we pick dad up at the gas station but mum can't drive through her tears.

Later Jolanka accuses me of asking her dad to drive me home, and then disappearing for two days. As if it was my mistake that we live close to the pub. As if it was my mistake that it turns out he had a year-long affair with my mum.

Jolanka sits away from me the first week of school. Since then, I've been working at the gas station alone, on September weekends before the weather gets too bad.

One day someone pulls over in an eighties gray Mercedes. The driver has an intense, alien glow in his asphalt eyes and says he's 19, but he looks like he's 30. He doesn't want me to clean his windows, but he buys me an ice-cream. Don't worry I'm clean, he says and hands me a cigarette. He wants to know when my shift ends. I say that I'm my own boss but I need the cash. He says he'll pick me up in an hour. I'm frightened and repulsed, so I say yes.

When he returns to the gas station 59 minutes later, Plihal takes me aside and imposes that I can't drive home with a drug addict, and sends him away. I hear my loud voice telling him that everyone in Lzovice is drunk-driving and that this guy has been clean for months, to which Plihal responds that it's bullshit, which he might be right about. I don't want to deal with Plihal anymore so I call it a day. I walk to the train-station and the Mercedes pulls off.

In the car we listen to dubstep. I tell Glow that I'm tired of being 16 because I can't vote or drive or run away to Australia. He says he doesn't understand my worries and parks in front of the socialist building of the Orion club, the crystal meth mecca. Before disappearing inside, Glow asks me if I wanted to try something special today. I say I'll think about it. Glow keeps calling me the whole summer, but I never answer.

After the weekend, Srkal says that the gas station shifts are taken till the end of the year. The word of mouth reaches my parents that it's because of my sharp tongue, lack of respect to elders and dubious friendships. I'm tired of proving them wrong.

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Several weeks later, word of mouth spills from Lzovice again - my father was stopped drunk-driving right after the hill behind the gas station on his way home. His driver's license is gone, maybe for good. Apparently he's been buying Bohemia Sect brut at the gas station every fucking night of the last ten years, Plihal and him sharing a bottle, sometimes two.

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Dad has been furious for 9 months until he got his license back. He spends more time at home, which makes mum file for divorce. He's convinced he was spied on, going through the possible culprits. It's interesting but not surprising that he only blames men. Mum and I look down when he asks who we think it was. As nobody goes to the gas station, we are left without our supplies of chocolate, so we only have our nails to bite into when he interrogates us.

Despite Jolanka's mum's intervention, some secrets remain uncovered and some marriages flourish, which makes Jolanka finally come around. Jolanka confesses to me over a bottle of cheap champagne that we nicked from Dad, that her mum forgave my mum for the sake of our friendship. I think it might be in exchange of my mum letting Jolanka stay with us. Her parents go on a month-long vacation to Croatia, for the first time since their honeymoon, as Jolanka's mum doesn't forget to emphasize.

Soon it will be summer again and we will need to look for summer jobs. Reluctantly, the gas station crosses our mind. As it turns out, it's the gas station's last year in business and a bad one. The Plihals won't be able to keep up with the gas prices, and the gas station with their health. Plihal will be diagnosed with a brain tumor, and then a few days later Plihal will fall ill with lung cancer. They recover but the gas station will be transformed into a Shell.

Grandma will find us a job in the fish factory in her town, changing the oil stink and heated asphalt for mackerel and roes, making the summer wet and cold.

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