

5th YEAR

A SEA of words

YOUTH'S FUTURE AND THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN GENERATIONS

Short stories by 14 young writers

A Sea of Words - 5th year

**Youth's Future and the
Dialogue between Generations**

Short stories by 14 young writers

IEMed.
European Institute of the Mediterranean

 **Anna Lindh
Foundation**
— EUROMED —

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A Sea of Words

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Foreword

Andreu Bassols. Director-General of the European Institute of the Mediterranean

Generations and Regeneration

Generations are a modern theme in sociology but they have always existed. We all have parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and great-great grandparents. Ortega y Gasset popularised them from philosophy following the line initiated by August Comte some years earlier. From the start of the so-called Christian era and calculating four generations per century, there have only been 80 generations between us and the contemporaries of Christ and his disciples. Even fewer generations, around 55, separate us from the beginning of the Muslim calendar, the Hegira. Hebrews are the most ancient, having reached the year 5773, which would make 231 generations. This is nothing compared with the generations of other animals that reproduce at a great speed with all the implications this entails from the point of view of adapting to the environment.

What we human beings cannot do with genetic changes we do with learning. Margaret Mead, the great American anthropologist, argued that in conservative and relatively unchanging societies, parents teach their children. These societies do not change very much and one generation after another transmits basically the same thing. In contrast, in societies under transformation, contemporaries teach each other and learn from their peers, but they learn little from their predecessors who are no longer aware of recent evolutions and adaptations. Margaret Mead, however, also stated that, from time to time, there are societies that change so quickly that the children teach new things to their parents. This is what happens to me and to my generation with computers, Internet and mobile phones, which we still do not understand completely despite the patient lessons of our generational heirs.

Everybody says that the Arab revolutions have had a technological component. Social networks, tweets and photos sent all over the world by phone spread through the revolutionary movements, from Tunisia to Yemen. A majority of young men and women, of boys and girls, aspire to have a little more dignified and fairer future than their parents.

The Mediterranean, a sea of ancient traditions, cradle of civilisations, philosophies and religions, of innovative political thought from Plato to Ibn Khaldun or Machiavelli, has gone through a very convulsive 2011 and 2012. On the one hand, the Arab revolutions and, on the other, the movements of dissatisfaction, the “indignants”. Both of them led by young people and *antagonized* by more experienced, sceptical and conservative generations... the ones that hold the power.

This year, the contest “A Sea of Words” sought to stimulate the imagination of young writers on the issue of generations. The reason is quite simple: we thought that it would be worthwhile for the current generation of youths who have made or experienced a revolution to reflect, through literary fiction, on the meaning of what is learnt and un-learnt, what is preserved and what is rejected, between generation and generation, between parents and children. Sons and daughters have made the revolution in Egypt and in Tunisia, have led an uprising in Libya,

and are participating in a war between brothers in Syria. Intergenerational relations are very important to understand why a determined generation accepts submission to a dictatorship while another generation goes into the street and the square calling for freedom and justice. The parents are conservative in nature. Their children want to open up new prospects. Pyromaniacs and firemen, it is a question of years, of generation, of being a grandfather or a granddaughter, a mother or a son. We wanted to know what the young writers thought although Jorge Luis Borges used to say that writers are by nature conservative because they work with words and words are the clearest expression of the unchanged character of tradition and often centenary codes, which are repeated with a few modifications. We are not sure that the Argentinean writer is right but it is true that the words written for our contest have helped us to understand how the young authors from Europe and the Mediterranean think and how they see relations with their ancestors.

The IEMed has always sought to be a bridge between the two sides of the Mediterranean. With this year's "A Sea of Words" we have aspired to build a modest literary bridge between the generations. It has been an interesting experience. We received almost 300 short stories from 34 countries and the jury selected 14, all of them of remarkable quality. They are now at your disposal in this collection, a virtual collection which does not occupy any space but that we hope will occupy a place in your thoughts and in your reflections about the future of generations and the generations of the future.

The Mediterranean world has started a new era. A regeneration is underway. A new generation of citizens, without giving up traditions and what they have learnt from their parents, want to be the protagonists of a new future. Literary fiction helps us to understand the aspirations, concerns and hopes of these new generations that now are called "emerging" but which are, quite often, "divergent". Happy reading.

Pròleg

Andreu Bassols. Director general de l'Institut Europeu del Mediterrani

Generacions i regeneració

Les generacions són un tema modern de la sociologia però sempre han existit. Tots tenim pares, avis, besavis i rebesavis. L'Ortega y Gasset les va popularitzar des de la filosofia seguint la línia iniciada per August Comte uns anys abans. D'ençà el començament de l'anomenada era cristiana i calculant 4 generacions per segle, hi ha hagut només 80 generacions entre nosaltres i els contemporanis de Crist i els seus deixebles. Del començament del calendari musulmà, la Hègira, ens separen encara menys generacions, unes 55. Els hebreus són els més antics: ara arrosseguen el seu any 5773, això faria 231 generacions. Res comparat amb les generacions d'altres animals que es reproduïxen a una gran velocitat amb totes les implicacions que això suposa des d'un punt de vista d'adaptació al medi.

El què els humans no podem fer amb canvis genètics ho fem amb l'aprenentatge. Margaret Mead, la gran antropòloga nord-americana, opinava que en les societats conservadores i relativament immutables, els pares ensenyen als fills. Són societats que no canvien gaire i el què es transmet és bàsicament el mateix una generació rere l'altra. En canvi, en les societats en transformació, els contemporanis s'instrueixen entre ells i aprenen dels seus coetanis, però aprenen poc dels seus predecessors que ja no estan al corrent de les evolucions i les adaptacions recents. Margaret Mead, però, també va dir que, de tant en tant, hi ha societats que canvien tant de pressa que són els fills els que ensenyen coses noves als seus pares i mares. Això em passa a mi i a la meua generació amb els ordinadors, l'internet i els telèfons mòbils que continuem sense entendre del tot malgrat les pacients lliçons dels nostres successors generacionals.

Tothom diu que les revolucions àrabs han tingut un gran component tecnològic. Les xarxes socials, les piulades i les fotografies enviades arreu del món a través del telèfon han contagiat els moviments revolucionaris, des de Tunísia fins al Iemen. Han estat una majoria de joves i de dones joves, de nois i noies que aspiren a tenir un futur una mica més digne i una mica més just que el dels seus pares i mares.

El Mediterrani, mar de tradicions mil·lenàries, bressol de civilitzacions, filosofies i religions, de pensament polític innovador des de Plató, passant per Ibn Khaldun i Maquiavel, ha viscut un 2011 i un 2012 molt trasbalsats. Per una banda, les revolucions àrabs. Per altra, els moviments d'insatisfacció, els "indignados". Uns i altres protagonitzats per joves i *antagonitzats* per generacions més veteranes, mes escèptiques i més conservadores... del poder que del que gaudeixen.

Aquest any, el concurs Mar de Paraules ha volgut provocar la imaginació dels joves escriptors sobre el tema de les generacions. La raó és molt simple: pensàvem que seria bo que una generació de joves actual, que ha fet o ha viscut una revolució, reflexionés, mitjançant la ficció literària, sobre el significat del què s'aprèn i es desaprèn, del què es conserva i es llença, entre generació i generació, entre pares i fills. Els fills han fet la revolució a Egipte i a Tunísia, han fet

una revolta a Líbia, estan fent una guerra entre germans a Síria. Les relacions entre generacions és molt important per comprendre perquè una generació determinada accepta sotmetre's a una dictadura i una altra generació surt al carrer i a la plaça i reclama llibertat i justícia. Els pares són de naturalesa conservadora. Els fills volen obrir noves perspectives. Piròmans i bombers, és una qüestió d'anys, de generació, de ser avi o néta, mare o fill. Volíem saber què en pensaven els joves escriptors tot i que Jorge Luis Borges deia que els escriptors són d'un natural conservadors perquè treballen amb paraules i les paraules són l'expressió més clara de la immutabilitat de la tradició, codis, sovint centenaris, que es repeteixen amb pocs canvis. No estem segurs que l'escriptor argentí tingui raó, però sí que és veritat que les paraules del nostre concurs ens han ajudat a comprendre com pensen els joves autors d'Europa i del Mediterrani i com veuen les relacions amb els seus avantpassats.

L'IEMed ha volgut sempre ser un pont entre els dos costats de la Mediterrània. Amb el Mar de Paraules d'enguany, hem aspirat a construir un modest pont literari entre les generacions. Ha estat una experiència interessant. Ens han arribat gairebé 300 contes des de 34 països i el jurat en va seleccionar 14, tots d'una remarcable qualitat, i ara els teniu a la vostra disposició en aquest volum, un volum virtual que no ocupa cap volum, però sí que volem que ocupi un lloc en el vostre pensament i en les vostres reflexions sobre el futur de les generacions i les generacions del futur.

El món mediterrani ha començat una nova era. Una regeneració està en marxa. Una nova generació de ciutadans, sense renunciar a les tradicions i al que han après dels seus pares, volen ser protagonistes d'un nou futur. La ficció literària ens ajuda a comprendre les aspiracions, les angoixes i les esperances d'aquestes noves generacions que ara en diuen "emergents", però que són, ben sovint, "divergents". Que tingueu una bona lectura.

Foreword

Andreu Claret. Executive Director of the Anna Lindh Foundation

“A Sea of Words” has reached its fifth, and probably most important edition thanks to the fertile collaboration of the IEMed and the Anna Lindh Foundation. The theme *Youth, Future and Intergenerational Dialogue* strikes at the very core of the democratic changes which are touching the Euro-Med region. Some youth have acted as catalysers for uprisings and have participated in the combats for redirecting their countries towards a brighter future. Others are struggling to find their ways amid economic crisis, unemployment towards an uncertain future. Standing in the crossroad between past and future, between dreams and realities, they face the challenge of transmitting their visions and ambitions to the generation of their parents and grandparents.

This edition of “A Sea of Words” offers a space for dialogue that transgresses the conventional and explores the voice of fiction, creativity and not least fantasy as a means for dialogue. The barriers and borders between generations are here broken down word by word, phrase by phrase; creating spaces and opportunities for shares visions.

In this regard, I am thankful for the commitment of the IEMed in reinforcing this programme in cooperation with the Anna Lindh Foundation. “A Sea of Words” has received this year 283 stories from 34 countries and 14 were selected by the International Jury. The continuous increase of participation in the contest since its very first launch is assign of its success. It shows the willingness of youth from the region to convey ideas, thoughts and to contribute to a vivid literary landscape.

Not only does “A Sea of Words” seek to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity but all at once between the North and South. May it be in societies where youth are the driving force and vast majority, or others where the share of the elderly is increasing, youth are participating in redefining roles and expectations in a context of fragmentation and crisis. New scenarios for the future are present in these short stories and are the red line running through the contributions.

It comes as no surprise that the revolutions who shook the Arab societies were anticipated through novels long before political analysts or experts predicted the course of history. It was reading Al Aswany or Khamisi and not the papers of renowned scholars in the Arab world that I got some early warnings about what was going to happen in Egypt. I am sure that reading the works of this fifth edition of “A Sea of Words”, we will have the opportunity to understand better what is happening in our societies, on both shores of the Mediterranean, and to anticipate some of the deep transformations which are on the way. These attempts to reach beyond the fictional into the concrete future can help us to look at events with sound distance, beneficial curiosity and critical spirit, and to paying an attentive ear to the voices of youth.

The work of the Anna Lindh Foundation focuses on generational and cultural transitions with the aim of creating spaces and encounters fostering understanding. How can we ensure

that the capital stored in history and multiple experiences is passed on to the next generations? “A Sea of Words” prioritises this exchange to contribute to a better understanding, respect and trust in the construction of the future. That was the purpose for launching the contest, six years ago, and I am proud to observe that, with this fifth edition, “A Sea of Words” comes of age, as a major initiative in the panoply of cultural Euro-Med Programmes.

Pròleg

Andreu Claret. Director Executiu de la Fundació Anna Lindh

Un mar de paraules ha arribat a la seva cinquena edició, i probablement és una de la més importants, gràcies a la col·laboració fèrtil de l'IEMed i la Fundació Anna Lindh. El tema “Joventut, Futur i el diàleg entre generacions” colpeja en el cor mateix dels canvis democràtics que estan en contacte amb la regió Euro-Med. Alguns joves han actuat com a catalitzadors dels aixecaments i han participat en els combats per la reorientació dels seus països cap a un futur més brillant. Altres estan lluitant per trobar el seu camí, enmig de la crisi econòmica i la desocupació, cap a un futur incert. En la cruïlla entre el passat i el futur, entre els somnis i la realitat, s'enfronten al repte de transmetre les seves visions i ambicions a la generació dels seus pares i avis.

Aquesta edició d'*Un mar de paraules* ofereix un espai per al diàleg que transgredeix el convencional i explora la veu de la ficció, la creativitat i la fantasia, mitjans importants per al diàleg. Les barreres i fronteres entre generacions es desfan paraula a paraula, frase a frase, creant espais i oportunitats de visions compartides.

En aquest sentit, em sento agraït pel compromís de l'IEMed en l'enfortiment d'aquest programa en col·laboració amb la Fundació Anna Lindh. *Un mar de paraules* ha rebut aquest any 283 històries de 34 països i un jurat internacional n'ha seleccionat 14. El continu augment de la participació en el concurs des del seu primer llançament constitueix el seu èxit. Això demostra la voluntat dels joves de la regió per a transmetre idees, pensaments i contribuir a un paisatge literari viu.

Un mar de paraules no tracta solament d'omplir el buit entre la tradició i la modernitat, si no també entre el Nord i el Sud. Els joves estan participant en la redefinició dels rols i de les expectatives en un context de fragmentació i crisi, tant en les societats on els joves són la força motriu i la gran majoria o en altres on la participació de la gent gran és cada vegada més important. Nous escenaris per al futur són presents en aquestes històries curtes i presenten una línia vermella a través de les seves contribucions.

No és cap sorpresa que les revolucions que van sacsejar les societats àrabs fossin anticipades a través de les novel·les, molt abans que els analistes polítics i experts vaticinessin el curs de la història. Estava llegint Al-Aswany o Khamisi, i no els papers d'acadèmics de gran prestigi en el món àrab, quan vaig obtenir algunes advertències primerenques sobre el que havia d'esdevenir a Egipte. Estic segur que amb la lectura de les obres d'aquesta cinquena edició de *Un mar de paraules* tindrem l'oportunitat d'entendre millor el que està succeint en les nostres societats a les dues ribes de la Mediterrània, i podrem anticipar algunes de les profundes transformacions que s'estan produint. Aquests intents d'arribar més enllà de la ficció en el futur concret ens poden ajudar a veure els esdeveniments des de la distància, la curiositat i l'esperit crític beneficiós, escoltant amb atenció les veus de la joventut.

El treball de la Fundació Anna Lindh se centra en les transicions generacionals i culturals amb l'objectiu de crear espais i trobades que fomentin la comprensió. Com podem assegurar que el capital acumulat en la història i múltiples experiències es transmet a les generacions se-

güents? *Un mar de paraules* prioritza aquest intercanvi per a contribuir a una millor comprensió, al respecte i la confiança en la construcció del futur. Aquest va ser el propòsit per al llançament del concurs, fa sis anys, i em sento orgullós d'observar que, en aquesta cinquena edició, *Un mar de paraules* arriba a la seva majoria d'edat com una important iniciativa en la panòpia de la cultura Euro-Med Programes.

Youth, Future and Intergenerational Dialogue

With the issue *Youth, Future and Intergenerational Dialogue*, we present the best titles for the fifth year of “A Sea of Words”, the short story contest for men and women aged between 18 and 30 living in the Euro-Mediterranean area. The topic deals with the intergenerational bond which highlights the views and expectations of youths along with the values and conflicts developed by their interaction with their elders and their wishes for Euro-Mediterranean societies.

“A Sea of Words” has reached its fifth year in 2012 thanks to the efforts and convictions of the European Institute of the Mediterranean and the Anna Lindh Foundation and their strong belief in this programme. “A Sea of Words” represents a unique method of cooperation, known as a “network initiative”, since the selection of stories involves all the Anna Lindh Foundation national networks.

283 short stories from 34 Euro-Mediterranean countries were received in 2012. The high level of involvement is due to the fact that participants can write in any of the official languages of the Euro-Mediterranean zone.

The broad scope of the call was possible thanks to its promotion by the almost 4,000 organizations that make up the 43 national networks of the Foundation, as well as other networks in the Euro-Mediterranean area, such as the Euro-Mediterranean Non-Governmental Platform, the European Youth Forum and the Euromed Permanent University Forum. Diverse organizations linked to some of these networks also strengthened the call through their own websites, newsletters and journals.

In order to carry out the selection process of the 14 winning stories, there was a pre-selection at national level conducted by the network coordinators of the Anna Lindh Foundation in each of the 43 states. Later, the organizers called an international jury comprising Elisabetta Bartuli, translator and professor at Ca’ Foscari University in Venice; Jamila Hassoune, Moroccan writer and librarian; Pere-Antoni Pons, Catalan writer; and Hanane Oulahillah, winner of the fourth contest.

In the 14 selected stories several issues emerge within the topic of youth, future and intergenerational dialogue. Plots and characters are driven by the fight against the past, distrust of the other and the stranger, respect for elders, the desire to try new experiences beyond one’s own borders, the challenge to accept one’s own body, as well as the thirst for knowledge and vengeance. These are seen as the links between the present generations in current society.

The jury members gave a special mention to three of the contest winners for the high quality of their stories and the originality of the subject matter: Katja Knežević, with her piece *Invisible Mother*, won the first prize; Veronika Puska, with the story *Half-Hearted* won the second prize; and Jamie O’Connell achieved third place with *The Lollipop Fields*.

Through their stories, the three winners analyze the different aspects of intergenerational conflict, from the common vision of the bond between generations to the open clash brought about by the new generations which do not see themselves reflected in the older generations and their ideals.

In Katja Knežević's *Invisible Mother* the main character faces her mother's pessimism and, more generally, the negativity that has pervaded the whole of Croatia during recent times, choosing to move abroad for a chance at fulfilment. Veronika Puska's *Half-Hearted* explores the expectations and fears that older generations have of the new one, calling on today's youth to become better through their elders' wise but impractical advice. Another aspect that emerges from the stories, notably in Jamie O'Connell's *The Lollipop Fields*, is the bond between generations and the good or bad legacy that parents and grandparents pass on to their successors.

The city of Barcelona hosted the awards ceremony and began a series of events that ended in the town of Girona. The awards ceremony to present prizes to the 14 contest winners took place on 5th November 2012 at the Institut d'Estudis Catalans in Barcelona.

The next day the 14 winners participated in the workshop "Literary Language, Instrument of Dialogue", during which they were able to present their stories and share their experiences and perceptions with the members of the jury and each other. The workshop took place at the Department of Youth of the Government of Catalonia and was attended by Mary Ellen Kerans, translator and coordinator of Mediterranean Editors and Translators (MET), who skilfully translated four of the winning stories of the 2010 and 2011 contests. The next day, in order to share an intercultural experience, there was a trip to the town of Girona, including a visit to the Jewish History Museum, the Dominican Monastery (current location of the Faculty of Arts), and a walk through the old town.

The European Institute of the Mediterranean and the Anna Lindh Foundation wish to thank all the people who have contributed to the success of "A Sea of Words": firstly, the 283 participants of the contest and the 43 national networks of the Anna Lindh Foundation; the members of the International Jury for their magnificent work and unflinching devotion; the Institut d'Estudis Catalans; the Department of Youth of the Government of Catalonia; the Department of Cultural Promotion and Cooperation of the Government of Catalonia; the Patronat del Call; Girona City Council; and the Maria-Àngels Anglada Chair for welcoming the 14 winners and organizing several activities in Girona. A special thank you to all the members of the work team of the European Institute of the Mediterranean and the Anna Lindh Foundation, especially their directors Andreu Bassols and Andreu Claret.



Presentation of awards to the young winners of the 2012 "A Sea of Words".



Visit to Girona by the young winners of the 2012 "A Sea of Words".

Nevidljiva majka

Katja Knežević. Hrvatska

Taj se postupak danas naziva „nevidljiva majka“. Kad je početkom prošlog stoljeća popularizirana fotografija i svaka se obitelj htjela ovjekovječiti, pa makar i samo tim jednim portetom, napravljenim samo jednom u životu, naručivali su i zasebne fotografije djece. Dijete, bez obzira na dob, moralo je biti sâmo na slici, imati vlastiti portret, vlastiti crno-bijeli odraz malog identiteta. Ali fotografija je još uvijek bila nešto sasvim novo, medij koji najavljuje puno, ali još ne daje previše. Bilo je malo prostora za pogreške i, ako bi dijete bilo previše nemirno, fotografija bi ispala previše mutna. Proizvod ne bi bio dobar, novac bi bio potraćen, a fotograf razočaran, možda i više nego obitelj. I tu bi dolazile na scenu, ili radije, iza scene, nevidljive majke. Žena bi držala dijete u krilu, ili ga samo pridržavala za ruku i pritom bi bila prekrivena zastorom ili prekrivačem. Tako bi dijete dobilo vlastiti portret, iako nikad ne bi bilo sâmo. Na nekim je fotografijama majka bila prilično nevješto sakrivena, činila i više no upadljiv dio scenografije, kao da obećaje da se njezina uloga u djetetovom životu nikad neće moći posve prekriti zastorima zaborava i odrastanja. Međutim, na drugima je varka bila toliko uspješna da na prvo gledanje uopće ne biste primijetili da je još netko na fotografiji, majka je bila samo tihi dio prostora, nevidljiva čvrsta točka za koju se dijete drži dok zbunjeno gleda pred sebe u nepoznato oko kamere.

* * *

Nisam osjećala ništa kad je mama izgubila prvi stabilan posao otkad smo se doselili u Hrvatsku. Bila sam dijete i nisam shvaćala koliko je to ozbiljno jer se iza riječi „budućnost“ nije krilo ništa više od sljedećeg dana. Kasnije se tek „budućnost“ udebljala i napuhala do odbojnosti, napunjena naslagama briga i nezgrapno prekrivena zastorima polu-uvjerljivih ohrabrenja. Mami je bilo izbijeno tlo pod nogama, ali isto to se dogodilo i s ratom i s bijegom iz Bosne tako da je vjerojatno nije previše iznenadilo. Bio je to šok koji je bio pomalo previše poznat i koji je nosio obećanje svojih povratka. Nakon toga nije imala stabilan posao sljedećih deset godina. Jamačno se i ona onda osjećala kao dijete, kad budućnost nije ništa više od sutra.

* * *

Kad sam postala dovoljno stara da ne budem dijete, ali ne i dovoljno da budem odrasla, odlučila sam da će budućnost biti velika. Jer mora biti. Jer sam uvijek bila najbolja u svemu i podrazumijevalo se da ću nastaviti biti najbolja u svemu. I iako je sadašnjost imala dosta uvjerljive protuargumente, uspješno sam je ignorirala. Nevjerojatno kako korice knjiga mogu biti visoki zidovi kada treba pogledati u tu nekakvu „stvarnost“.

Mama je tada radila kao čistačica. I otprilike onoliko koliko sam ja bila udaljena od stvarnosti (s nosom u knjigama koje su uvijek nekako unaprijed i komplicirale i objašnjavale život), toliko je i ona sa svojim obrazovanjem bila udaljena od posla koji je radila. Čistila bi 5 sati u

komadu, a onda na povratku kući u tramvaju čitala knjige. Duša se hranila samo u prolazu. „Mama, ti si vjerojatno jedina čistačica u Hrvatskoj koja u tramvaju iz torbe izvlači Braću Karamazove.“ Ona se smijala, tužna i ponosna. Zamišljala sam je kako izlazi iz škole koju čisti, umorna, ulazi u tramvaj pun ljudi mutnih lica, usidrenih u nekakvim brigama (ljudi u tramvaju uvijek izgledaju zabrinuto), a u torbi se veselo sudaraju Domestos i Dostojevski. No i taj je ples kratko trajao. Kao i taj posao.

* * *

Kad sam bila pri kraju sa studijem, tanka nit između zamišljene budućnosti i stvarne sadašnjosti istopila se i potonja je potpuno potopila onu prvu. Odskočila sam iz knjiga u udaljenija sanjarenja.

Zašto misliš da moraš otići iz Hrvatske da bi bila sretna? Ljudi koji bježe van ne stignu ništa dalje nego da su ostali doma.

– Mama, kako ti nije jasno da ovdje nema budućnosti? *Nema*.

– A vani kao ima? Pa i tamo je kriza. Samo što ćeš tamo još biti stranac. Vani idu šljakeri i znanstvenici. Ti nisi nijedno.

Tu sam ušutjela. Odnedavno sam odlučila da su „budućnost“ i „vani“ istoznačnice, no kad bih zastala i malo bolje promislila o tome, „vani“ nije imalo ništa opipljiviji oblik. Nebitno. Krajnja neizvjesnost koja počinje spuštanjem kofera na stranom kolodvoru činila se i čini se puno sigurnijom od izvjesnog straha u Hrvatskoj.

– Znaš što sam zanimljivo čula nedavno? – upita me mama da me razbudi iz uzaludnog kruga misli. – Čula sam da čovjek najveće strahove u životu doživi između dvadesete i dvadeset devete godine. Zanimljivo, zar ne? Tko bi rekao, baš te godine.

– Pa valjda zato što u tim godinama osjećaš da *moraš* napraviti neki presudan izbor koji će odrediti ostatak života, a nemaš pojma koji bi to izbor trebao biti. – otpovrnula sam automatizirano, izrecitala misli koje sam već bezbroj puta izvirtila u glavi u lovu na konkretniju definiciju famoznog post-adolescentuskog *angsta*.

– Hm, da, može biti... Kad se sjetim tog razdoblja, nekako je dvostruko...

– Dvostruko? – naglo sam dignula glavu, sretna što sam otkrila da se i mama osjećala raspolovljeno. Kao da imaš istovremeno i višak i nedovoljno identiteta; kao odraz u slomljenom zrcalu.

– Pa da. Sjećam se tih nekih lijepih stvari i doživljaja... Studentski izlasci, druženja s prijateljima. I, paralelno, nekako istovremeno, taj jedan te isti osjećaj straha. Iznutra si kao hladna pustinja.

– Hm...

– Da, baš to. Hladna pustinja.

* * *

Mama se namrštila i napučila usne.

– Koliko je to sigurno?

– Sigurno je. Vjeruj mi. Ne bih išla samo tako tamo. To je sve u sklopu tog programa... Kužiš, kako sad Hrvatska ulazi u Uniju, žele da se unaprijede te razmjene mladih ljudi između Hr-

vatske i europskih zemalja... – recitirala sam propagandu programa za međunarodnu razmjenu.

– Znači, stanoviti broj odgovornih ljudi će sigurno znati gdje sam ja i što trebam raditi. Kužiš?

– Pa dobro, kako to ide?

– Ako mi prijava prođe, imat ću razgovor preko Skypea pa ćemo vidjeti.

– Preko čega?

– Preko interneta. S kamerom.

– Aha. Ajd dobro.

Prijava je prošla.

Noć prije razgovora sanjala sam kako hodam po pustinji. Bilo je jako hladno. Sjela sam na tlo, grabila pijesak rukama i puštala da mi bježi kroz prste. Kad sam podigla glavu, učinilo mi se da u daljini vidim mamu kako čini nešto slično, no kad sam trepnula, vidjela sam da je to samo stijena koja se još nije pretvorila u pijesak.

Kad sam se probudila, dugo sam trljala ruke pod vodom. Činilo mi se kao da pijesak ne želi van iz moje kože.

* * *

– Halo? Čujemo li se? Halo?

– Da, ovdje sam. Dobar dan. Ja sam Katja.

Dobar dan, Katja. Drago mi je da se napokon vidimo, pa makar i preko kamere.

Žena koja me gledala kroz Skypeov prozor bila je vesela, ali na neki neutralan, uvježban način. Bila sam nervozna. Ne toliko zbog razgovora, koliko zbog toga što moram govoriti na francuskom. Oko lapotpa sam poredala improvizirane blesimetre: komade kartona na kojima sam crvenim markerom napisala duge, nakićene, gramatički provjerene rečenice na francuskom o tome zašto trebam, želim i moram dobiti ovo stažiranje.

Žena je brzo počela cvrkutati o njihovoj udruzi i koja bi bila moja zaduženja ako bi me primili. Kada je završila vidno istrošeni monolog, rekla mi je da joj kažem nešto o sebi. Zastala sam na trenutak i udahnula. Tijekom filmski dugih tri sekunde našla sam se pred izborom: reći joj istinu ili čitati s blesimetra. Dvije Katje su se počele prepirati: *Ozbiljno, Katja? Zar stvarno želiš igrati na kartu izbjeglice sa samohranom majkom i cendrati o Bosni, o Hrvatskoj u kojoj nitko ne može naći posao, o maminoj nezaposlenosti... Ozbiljno? Zar misliš da moraš posezati za time da bi uspjela? Pa ne, ne mislim, ali, zar nije ispravnije biti iskren? Ma je li? Ispravno, ili samo jako zgodno i lako? Što da si odrasla u imućnoj obitelji? Što bi ti onda bio adut? Ne budi glupa; žena mora vidjeti optimizam i energiju, a ne žicanje.* I tada je bio red na meni da održim monolog. Napola pogledavajući blesimetar, a napola improvizirajući, raspričala sam se o tome kako sam dobra s ljudima, kako volim učiti nove stvari, kako sam dobra u svemu (s godinama su Katje postigle kompromis i odlučile da sam dobra, a ne najbolja u svemu). itd. itd. Žena je klimala glavom, smješkala se, tu i tamo ubacila pokoje „D'accord, d'accord.“ Izgledala je zadovoljno, a ja sam govorila sve više i sve brže. Kad sam napokon zaključila govor smiješkom, ona je upitala: „A čime se dugoročno želite baviti u životu?“ Kao da nije mogao podnijeti pritisak pitanja, Skype se smrznuo. Nekoliko predugih trenutaka ženino lice je stajalo na ekranu zamrznuto u smiješku. Ovako zaustavljeno u vremenu, izgledalo je još neprirodnije i pomalo nestvarno. Onda se čulo još nekoliko zaostalih riječi i veza se ugasila. U prozoru više nije bilo nezino lice, nego samo tamni ekran sa sivim zrcima.

Više nismo uspjeli uspostaviti vezu. Poslala mi je *e-mail* da zapravo i nije bitno da dovršimo razgovor; saznala je dovoljno o meni i ovako.

* * *

Tri tjedna kasnije dobila sam *e-mail* u kojem je veoma ljubaznim, ali još uvijek osjetno distanciranim tonom pisalo da sam dobila stažiranje i da se raduju mom dolasku. To je bilo to. Budućnost me čekala vani.

* * *

- Javi mi se čim stigneš. Baš me briga ako bude i tri ujutro.
- Ok, mama...
- Ok. Ajd. Nek te dragi Bog čuva.
- Da. Hvala.

Pogledala sam preko ramena prema izlazu za moj let i onda opet u mamino lice. Izgledala je toliko uzbuđeno kao da i ona putuje.

- Mama?
- Molim, dušo?
- Hvala.
- Na čemu?

– Pa onak', na svemu, općenito. – promrmljala sam, glupo se nasmiješila i pogledala u pod. Htjela sam reći: *Hvala ti na svemu, oduvijek. Što si čistila glupe urede, i glupe škole i čuvala glupu djecu dok sam ja čitala knjige. Što si učinila da sve funkcionira. Ovo ne radim samo radi sebe, nego i da ti dokažem da smo uspjele.* Ali nisam. Nekako mi se činilo da je to sve jasno. A i nisam htjela riskirati da plačemo usred zračne luke, to bi bilo nekako neukusno.

Stavila sam torbu preko ramena i krenula prema izlazu, osvrnuvši se nekoliko puta. Smjestila sam se u avion, vezala pojas, ugasila mobitel i odslušala stjuardesin entuzijastični monolog. Potom sam otvorila torbu i izvadila Šimićeva *Preobraženja*, svoju omiljenu zbirku. Kako sam je nespreno primila, ispala mi je na pod. Sagnula sam se da je dignem i tada zamijetila nešto na nogavici. Izgledalo je kao tamni prah. Sjetila sam se da smo, hodajući prema luci, prolazili preko jedno šljunčanog puteljka i da sam se spotaknula nekoliko puta jer mi je kovčeg bio pretežak. Valjda su se tad nogavice zaprljale. Otresla sam ih rukom i pogledala u dlan. Zrnca pijeska bacala su sitne sjajne odraze sunca. Pogledala sam u jedno zrno pijeska na dlanu, tu jedva vidljivu čvrstu točkicu. Sklopila sam šaku i potom pogledala u oblake. Zagreb se više nije ni nazirao, avion je zaplovio duboko u nepoznato. Nakon ove točke ostala je samo nada.

Invisible Mother

Katja Knežević. Croatia

Nowadays that procedure is called “invisible mother”. When at the beginning of the last century photography became popular and every family wanted to render itself eternal, even if only with that one portrait, made only once in a lifetime, they would order separate photographs of children. The child, regardless of age, had to be alone in the picture, have its own portrait, its own black and white reflection of its small identity. But photography was still something new, a medium announcing plenty, but not yet yielding very much. There was little room for errors and, if the child was too restless, the photograph would turn out too blurry. The product would not have been good, money would have been wasted, and the photographer disappointed, perhaps even more than the family. And this is where the invisible mothers would come to the scene, or rather, behind the scene. The woman would hold the child in her lap, or just hold its hand while being covered by a curtain or a blanket. Thus the child would get its own portrait, although it was never alone. In some photographs, the mother was hidden quite awkwardly, being more than a noticeable part of the set design, as if she were promising that her role in the child’s life would never completely be covered by the curtains of oblivion and growing up. However, in others the trick was so successful that at first sight you wouldn’t even notice someone else was in the photograph, the mother was just a silent part of the space, an invisible fixed point that the child was holding onto while confusedly looking ahead into the unfamiliar eye of the camera.

* * *

I didn’t feel anything when my mum lost her first stable job since we had moved to Croatia. I was a child and did not understand how serious it was because the word “future” only contained the next day in it. Later the “future” fattened up and inflated to the point of repulsion, filled with layers of worries and ungainly covered by the veils of semi-convincing encouragements. Mum had the ground knocked out from under her, but the same had happened with the war and the escape from Bosnia so she was probably not too thrown by it. It was a shock a bit all too familiar, bearing the promise of its returns. After that she didn’t have a stable job for the next ten years. She, too, must have felt like a child then, as if the future were no more than tomorrow.

* * *

When I was old enough not to be a child any more, but not enough to be an adult, I decided the future would be grand. Because it had to be. Because I was always the best at everything and it went without saying that I would continue to be the best at everything. And even though the present had quite convincing counter-arguments, I successfully ignored it. It is incredible how big a book cover can be when one has to look into this “reality”.

Mum worked as a cleaning lady at the time. And about as far as I was at the time from reality (with my nose in books that would always somehow complicate and explain life), she was as far removed with her education from the job she was doing. She would clean for five hours straight, and then

on her way back home she would read books on the tram. Her soul was receiving nourishment only in passing.

“Mum, you are probably the only cleaning lady in Croatia who pulls out *The Brothers Karamazov* from her bag in the tram.”

She would smile, sad and proud. I would picture her coming out of the school she was cleaning, tired, getting into a tram full of people with turbid faces, anchored in worries of some sort (people in trams always look worried), and Domestos and Dostoyevsky merrily bumping into each other in her bag. But that dance wouldn't last for long. Neither would her job.

* * *

When I was nearing the end of my studies, the thin line between the imagined future and the real present faded away and the latter completely sank the former. I bounced from books to more distant daydreams.

“Why do you think you have to leave Croatia to be happy? People who run away abroad do not get any further than they would have had they stayed at home.”

“Mum, how do you not see that there is no future here? *No future.*”

“And supposedly there is out there? There is a crisis there, too. Only you'll be a foreigner on top of everything. Blue collar workers and scientists go abroad. You are neither.”

This is when I fell silent. I had recently decided that “future” and “abroad” were synonyms, but when I stopped to think about it, “abroad” had no more of a tangible form. Irrelevant. The ultimate uncertainty that begins when you put down your suitcase at a foreign train station seemed and still seems much safer than the certain fear in Croatia.

“You know something interesting I heard recently?” my mum asks me to wake me up

from the futile circle of thoughts. “I heard that man experiences his biggest fears in life between the age of 20 and 29. Interesting, isn't it? Go figure, ha? That age precisely.”

“Well, I guess it's because at that age you feel you *have to* make a decisive choice that will determine the rest of your life, and you have no idea what that choice is supposed to be,” I retorted automatically, reciting thoughts I had spun in my head endless times, hunting for a more concrete definition of the famous post-adolescent *angst*.

“Ahem, yes, could be... When I think back on that period, it somehow seems dual...”

“Dual?” I suddenly raised my head, happy to have discovered that mum had felt halved, too. As if at the same time you had both too much and too little identity; like a reflection in a broken mirror.

“Well, yeah. I remember some nice things and experiences... Going out as a student, hanging out with friends. And, somehow simultaneously, that feeling of fear. On the inside you're like a cold desert.”

“Hm...”

“Yes, that's it. A cold desert.”

* * *

Mum frowned and pursed her lips.

“How safe is that?”

“It's safe. Believe me. I wouldn't go there just like that. It's all part of this programme... See, now that Croatia is entering the Union, they want to enhance those exchanges of young people between Croatia and European countries...” I recited the propaganda of the international exchange programme. “So, a certain number of responsible people will certainly know where I am and what I'm supposed to do. Get it?”

“Ok, how does it work?”

“If my application is accepted, I'll have an interview on Skype and then we'll see.”

“On what?”

“On the internet. With a camera.”

“Aha. OK then.”

The application was accepted.

The night before the interview I dreamed I was walking in the desert. It was very cold. I sat down on the ground, scooped up sand with my hands and let it slip through my fingers. When I lifted my head, I thought I saw my mum in the distance doing something similar, but when I blinked, I saw it was only a rock that hadn't turned to sand yet.

When I woke up, I rubbed my hands under water for a long time. It seemed as if the sand wouldn't get out of my skin.

* * *

“Hello? Can you hear me? Hello?”

“Yes, I'm here. Good morning. I'm Katja.”

“Good morning, Katja. I'm glad to finally see you, even if it's through a camera.”

The woman looking at me through the Skype window was cheerful, but in a neutral, practised way. I was nervous. Not so much because of the interview as for the fact that I had to speak French. I had put improvised prompters around my laptop: pieces of cardboard with long, embellished, grammatically checked sentences in French on why I need, want and must get this internship, penned with a red marker.

The woman quickly started chirping about their association and what my tasks would be if they accepted me. When she finished her visibly worn-out monologue, she asked me to say something about myself. I stopped for a moment and took a breath.

During three long seconds I found myself facing a choice: Do I tell her the truth or do I read from the prompter? The two Katjas started arguing: “Seriously, Katja? Do you really want to play the card of a refugee with a

single mother and whine about Bosnia, about Croatia that nobody can find a job in, about mum's unemployment... Seriously? Do you think you have to reach for that to succeed? Well, no, I don't think that but, isn't it more correct to be honest? Oh, is it? Correct, or only very convenient and easy? What if you had grown up in a wealthy family? What would be your trump card then? Don't be silly; the woman must see optimism and energy, not scrounging.”

And then it was my turn to give a monologue. Half looking at the prompters, half improvising, I went on about how good I was with people, how I loved to learn new things, how I was good at everything (over the years the two Katjas reached a compromise and decided that I was good, not the best at everything), etc...

The woman nodded, smiled, interjected with “*D'accord, d'accord*” every now and then. She seemed pleased, and I talked more and more and faster and faster. When I finally concluded my speech with a smile, she asked:

“And what would you like to do in life in the long term?”

As if unable to bear the pressure of the question, Skype froze. For several all too long moments, the woman's face stood on the screen frozen in a smile. Thus halted in time, it looked even more unnatural and a bit unreal. Then a few leftover words were heard and the connection broke. The window no longer held her face, just a dark screen with grey dots.

We did not manage to establish a connection again. She sent me an e-mail saying it wasn't really necessary to finish the interview; she had already found out enough about me.

* * *

Three weeks later I received an e-mail that said in a very polite, but still perceptibly dis-

tant tone, that I had been given the internship and they were looking forward to my coming. That was it. The future was waiting for me abroad.

* * *

“Call me as soon as you get there. I don’t care if it’s 3 am.”

“OK, mum...”

“OK. Go. May the dear Lord protect you.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

I looked over my shoulder towards the gate for my flight and then again at my mum’s face. She looked so excited as if she were travelling, too.

“Mum?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“You know, for everything, in general,” I mumbled, smiled stupidly and looked at the floor. I wanted to say: *Thank you for everything, always. For cleaning stupid offices and stupid schools, and babysitting stupid kids*

while I read books. For making it all work. I’m not doing this just for myself, but to prove to you that we have succeeded. But I didn’t. Somehow it seemed to me that it was all clear. And I didn’t want to risk crying in the middle of the airport; that would have been tacky.

I put the bag over my shoulder and started for the gate, turning around a few times. I got on the plane, fastened my seatbelt and took out Šimić’s *Transformations*, my favourite collection. As I held it clumsily, it fell on the floor. I bent down to pick it up, and then I noticed something dark on my trouser legs. It looked like dark powder. I remembered that, walking towards the airport, we had crossed a gravel path and I had tripped several times because my suitcase was too heavy. I guess my trouser legs got dirty then. I brushed it off with my hand and looked at my palm. The grains of sand were making tiny reflections of the sun. I looked at a grain of sand on my palm, this barely visible sturdy dot. I folded my hand and then looked at the clouds. Zagreb was no longer discernible; the plane had sailed deep into the unknown. After this point there was only hope.

Felehold

Veronika Puska. Magyar

Ahogy megláttam a konyhaasztalra kikészített citromos nápolyit, az almákat, a két zacskó instant kávé, no meg anyámat egy szál bugyiban és blúzban futkosni a konyha és a fürdőszoba között, egyből kitaláltam, löttek a kényelmes délutáni olvasgatásnak. Szinte már hallottam kocsink indulást jelző motorbúgását és képzeletben már ott ültem a hátsó ülésen.

– Jó, hogy jöttél, le se vetközz, mindjárt indulunk – torpant meg anyám és kritikus szemmel felmérte, mit viselek. Szája szeglete alig érezhetően megrándult, ez nála a nemtetszés jele volt. – Ebben mentél dolgozni? – mered rá nadrágomra, ami egy mérettel nagyobbra sikeredett a szükségesnél így kissé lógott rajtam. – Húzd be a hasad, ne nyomd így ki!

– Anya, nem vagyok már deszkatestű 16 éves, múlt hónapban töltöttem a 28-at, elfelejtetted? – néztem rá unottan és csak azért is jobban kidomborítottam a szégyen tárgyát. Megszokott civódás volt ez már köztünk, az istennek se bírta elfogadni, az ő karcsú tini lányából normális súlyú felnőtt nő lett. No jó, a normálisnál öt kilóval súlyosabb.

Szánalmas közhely, mi? Mindig csak öt kiló kell a boldogsághoz és a női önbecsüléshez!

– Hova készülsz? – kérdeztem meg teljesen feleslegesen, hiszen nagyon jól tudtam, anya többnyire akkor szokott így megkergülni, ha az öregek otthonába készült.

– Mintha nem tudnád. Anyuhoz – robogott be a nappaliba, ami egyben szüleim hálószobáját is jelentette. Pár másodperccel később egy nadrággal jött elő, s mikor felvette, ajkbiggyesztenve állapította meg, míg máskor be kellett vetetnie ruhái derekából, úgy festett, ideje lesz engedni belőle. Mi már csak ilyen család voltunk: reflektorfényben a súly! Jaj volt annak, aki nem adott magára! Mintha a kilók függvényében kéne magunkat meghatározni!

Ezt csak mások cinikus vagy éppenséggel irigykedő figyelése előzte meg, nehogy lemaradjunk arról, kinek van új kocsija, ki hol nyaral külföldön az idén vagy kinek a kárára lehet valami zaftos, helyi pletykát elsutyorogni! A kisvárosok egyik kevésbé szívmengető velejárója volt a szomszédok mindent látó szeme.

– Segíthetnél, ahelyett, hogy csak ott állsz!

Nem volt jó passzban, s hogy megelőzzem, rajtam csattanjon az ostor, nem sok lelkesedéssel előhoztam a kamrából a kosarat, amibe a nagyinak szánt holmikat szoktuk pakolni. Az asztalon látott dolgok mellé csomagoltunk egy kis házi kosztot – nem mintha az otthonban nem főztek volna eleget és jól, de anya ragaszkodott hozzá –, továbbá három pár vadonatúj meleg zoknit, négy tundrabugyit. Nagy lába mindig fázott, még a legnagyobb nyári kánikulában is. Kezemben az alsóneműkkel eltöprengtem egy pillanatra. Idősként én is ilyenekben fogok feszíteni, vagy ezt csak a régi vágású nyugdíjasok viselték?

Én szép csöndesen pakoláztam, anya meg mérgezett egérként futkosott. Hol a pénztárcáját, hol a szemüvegét nem találta, aztán a karóráját volt képtelen egy kézzel bekapcsolni. Idegességét még apám is észrevette, aki általában kimaradt a készülődés lázából.

Elég volt megkérdeznie, mi baja van, onnantól kezdve az idősek otthona felé végig azt hallgathattam, ha megint emelik a nagy gyógyszereinek árát, meg a bentlakást fedező havidíjat,

akkor komolyan el kell azon gondolkoznunk, kihozzuk onnét. Apa újra letette voksát, ő ehhez nem járul hozzá s ha nagyi jön, ő megy, jobban mondvá hazaköltözik az egy utcával arrébb lakó anyjához.

Lábjegyzet, eddigi tapasztalataim szerint minél távolabb laknak egymástól a rokonok, annál egészségesebb a viszonyuk.

Hát mi aztán ezt nem mondhattuk el magunkról, apai nagyanyám szinte a szomszédban lakott, de attól még olyan gyakran látott engem vagy az anyámat. Mintha az ország másik felén laktunk volna, és anyai nagyim is csak két településsel arrébb élvezte nyugdíjas éveit.

Élvezte? Ezzel azért vitatkoznék. A jó szó rá a vegetálás volt.

Én csöndesen gubbasztottam volna, ha nem hallom meg, anya megemlíti, gyakorlatilag azért látogattunk el a nagyihoz ebben a hónapban már másodszorra, mert hívták az otthonból.

– Mi van, ha Kamcsatkán lagnánk is ezt csinálnák? Berángatnának kéthetenként mert hol ez, hol az jut eszükbe? Ha bajuk van, ott a telefon, azon keresztül is el lehet mondani! Ez a kézbe való gyógyszerkifizetés is mekkora hülyeség már! – fortyantam fel. – Manapság mindeni banki átutalással intézi az ilyesmit!

Lehetett volna annyi eszem, tudjam, egy ilyen beszélással lehet leginkább felpiszkálni anyámat, de annyira untam, madárnak nézték és ugráltatták. Hiába volt már 55 éves, képtelen volt nemet mondani.

Jött a tiráda arról, mért így beszéltek meg a vezetőséggel, de én jobban tudtam, mért adta be újra és újra a derekát. Legutóbb nagyi azzal sértette meg, míg más bentlakóhoz hetente járnak, ő talán havonta ha odavetődik.

Ez akkora hazugság volt, hogy csoda, kimondásakor nem süllyedt el a föld alá. Rajta kívül a többi vénségre talán évente egyszer gondoltak a hozzátartozók és többnyire akkor is telefonon hívták fel az alapítványi otthont, ugyan él-e még a „szeretett rokon”. Bájos, ahogy dögkeselyük módjára várták, mikor szenderül jobb létre, hogy végre megkaparinthassák a vélt örökséget.

Anya is megkapta már, milyen szívtelen lánya az anyjának, hogy volt szíve betenni őt egy otthonba. Egykeként kutya kötelessége lett volna gondoskodnia róla. Anyám viszont legalább abban vette a bátorságot, felmérte, hogy csak munkája, saját családja és lelki egészségének rovására tudna ennek eleget tenni, így kijárta, helyet kapjon az egyik ismerőse által vezetett otthonban.

Tanúsíthatom, szegény nagyi az utolsó két évben megroggyant egészségileg és egyre előrehaladottabb agyér-elmeszesedése miatt sajnos már nem lehetett egyedül hagyni. A házi ápolást is próbáltuk, de sajnos romló állapota megkívánta a huszonnégy órás felügyeletet.

Bár mi tudtuk, melyik döntést miért hoztuk, mások nem bizonyultak megértőnek és nagyim is értett ahhoz, zongorázzon lánya büntudatán. Anyám többek között ezért volt hót ideg, valahányszor az otthonba készültünk. Vajon nagyi ma mivel készül? Felemlgeti, hogy tehetett vele anyám ilyen? Vagy hogy lopnak a nővéreké, kiállhatatlanok a lakótársak?

– Ereszd el a füled mellett, direkt csinálja, mert látja, megbánthat, ha ilyeneket mond – tanácsoltam anyámnak. Ő ilyenkor összepréselt ajkakkal kinézett az ablakon, ebből kitaláltam, valahol mélyen igazat adott nagyimnak.

Fejemet ingattam. Ha már egyszer meghozott egy döntést, inkább állt volna ki mellette, de ne tette volna rojtossá az idegeit a folytonos kételkedéssel: *Jól csináltam? Helyesen cselekedtem?*

Szerintem egy nap ez a feloldhatatlan helyzet fogja a sírba vinni.

Nehéz szívvel léptem át a hársfákkal körbeültetett Félhold – nagyim szerint Felehold – Idősek Otthonának küszöbét. Nem az öregség szaga, vagy a sok, elesett, magányos néni és bácsi látványa zavart, még csak a plafon pergő festése sem, hanem az, szembesülnöm kellett azzal, mivé lett gyerekkorom tevékeny, telken kertészkedő, zserbót és fasírtot sütő nagymamája.

Már várt minket botjára támaszkodva, otthonkában hunyorogva a második emelet lépcsőfordulóján. Rövid, ősz haja szép loknikban kunkorodott a fején, a héten dauerolhatták, bal oldalt kicsit elaludta. Nagy világ életében alacsony volt, alig érte el a 160 centimétert, de öregségére, ha lehetséges, még jobban összetöpörödött. Gyerekként sokat ugrattam nagy hasa miatt, mert még nem fogtam fel, előttem állt a jövőm. Családunk nőtagjai hízekonyak voltak deréktájban.

Anya saját védelme érdekében műmosolyt öltött és igyekezett tüsténkedni körülötte. Bekísérte szobájába, amit két másik nénival osztott meg, leültette az ágy szélére, kipakolta, amit hoztunk, és még arra is szánt időt, egyeztessen a nővérekkel az állapotáról, az esedékes költségekről.

Apa nem jött be hozzám, lent maradt a kocsiban. Az otthon maga rendezett volt, de nem a legjobb környékre épült. A település régen a bányászatból élt meg, ám mivel a tárnákat bezárták, megnőtt a szegénység. A közbiztonság nem volt kimondottan rossz, de az ördög nem aludt. Eldöntötte, ha egy óra múlva sem jövünk ki, megcsörget, elég lesz. Így szerette volna elkerülni, nagy felhúzza anyát.

A megszokott „mit hoztál?”-kérdés körbejárása után fakó szemével engem vett szemügyre.

– Jól nézel ki, Bernadett.

Csöndesen mosolyogtam. Erre mit mondhattam volna?

– Van már állásod?

Belecsapott a közepébe, nem volt szívbjajos öregasszony.

– Nem, még nincs – feleltem vontatottan. Épp eléggé bántott, hogy a diplomás munkanélküliek táborát gyarapítottam.

– Viszont közmunka programban vesz részt – hangsúlyozta ki anyám, nehogy nagy azt higgye, otthon vakarom a fenekem a segínyt felélve. Számat elhúzva helyeslőn bólogattam. Magyarországon a munkanélküliek számára a szociális juttatások közmunkához voltak kötve. Aki nem működött együtt az állammal, nem kapott egy petákot se.

– És mit csinálsz?

– Irodai asszisztens vagyok.

És én még jól is jártam. Más nálam képzetesebb embert előfordult, hogy utcaseprésre köteleztek.

– Folyamatosan keres állást, de még eddig nem talált neki valót – vette át a szót anyám.

Ehhez örömmel hozzáraaktam volna, abban a szakmában, amit anyám megálmodott nekem, nem is. Nagyon nem egyeztünk abban, mihez is kezdjek az életemmel.

– Anya még mindig erőlteti, biológus legyek – jelentettem ki ingerlően. – Nem érti, ez a szekér elment. Öt éve diplomáztam, egy napot nem dolgoztam a végzettségemmel, a tudásom eléggé elavult.

– Dolgozhatnál abban, ha hallgatsz rám meg, ha eléggé akarnád – nézett rám szúrósan anyám.

– Tőled aztán láttam példát kitartásra és önmegvalósításra: régész helyett óvónó lettél – vágok vissza gonoszul.

– Majd lesz jobb is, kislányom – remegett meg a kortól nagy hangja. – Hát fiúd van-e már? Lassan kimész a korból, babád legyen.

Anya visszanyelte megbántottságát, helyettem erre is megfelelt:

– Nem, még nincs neki. Nehéz a mai fiataloknak ismerkedni.

– De ugye nem vagy lesbikus? – hajolt közelebb nagy és magasba ugrott szemöldököm.

– Most is nadrágban vagy, pedig annyi szép szoknyád van! És a hajad is levágattad rövidre...

Anya eddig ölébe rejtett kézzel üldögélt, most viszont elmélyült a ránc szeme sarkában, nagyimra meredt.

– Anyu, hogy mondhatasz ilyet?

Nem szívtam mellre, szórakozottan mosolyogtam.

– Nyugi nagy, ez áll tőlem a legtávolabb. Ha kevesebb ész és több szilikon meg stílus szorul belém, bizonyára lenne pasim.

– Lenne stílusod, de direkt nem adsz magadra. A modorod is hagy kívánni valót maga után.

– Nem fogom másnak mutatni magam, mint aki vagyok.

– Ne is! Légy önérzetes és szingli! Az most úgy is divatos! A te korodban viszont én már jócskán anya voltam: betöltöttem a hetet.

– És akkor mi van? A te korodban még mobiltelefon se volt.

– Nono! – emelte fel ujját nagy. – Ne beszélj így anyáddal, csak aggódik miattad.

– Hát nem kell aggódnia, megoldom egyedül.

– Persze, ezért laksz még mindig nálunk – bukott ki anyám száján és ezzel végleg elrontotta a hangulatomat. Ez volt a második dolog az állástalanság mellett, ami elkésértett. Felőtt fejjel visszaköltözni a szülőkhöz több, mint kínos.

– Bocs, hogy a két hónapból egy év lett, de nincs egy rakás megtakarított pénzem, hogy vaktában elmenjek egy idegen városba albérletbe és ott próba szerencse alapon állást keressek!

– Akkor mégis mit akarsz? Ahol mi lakunk, nincs kilátás a fiataloknak! Fel kéne menned Budapestre, ott vannak az unokatestvéreid is.

– Szarok az unokatestvéreimre! – fakadtam ki. – Sose voltunk jó viszonyban, névleg rokonok vagyunk, de amúgy rohadtul nem törődünk egymással! Most aztán jól mutatna, ha nyalnék nekik, ugyan segítsenek már!

– Ne kiabálj, mit fognak mondani mások? – szikrázott fel anyám szeme. – Ezért jöttünk el?! – sziszeg rám.

De engem már nem lehetett megállítani, ami a szívemet nyomta, az bizony előjött:

– És békén hagyhatnál már azzal, burkoltan utalásokat teszel, szerinted fognom kéne egy pénzes pasit! Nem fogom úgy megszervezni az életemet, mint a másod-unokatestvéreim, akik csak a bukszát nézték és kitaratják magukat! Inkább élek csórón, becsülettel, mint megtollasodva, ribancként!

– Hú, Bernadett! De csúnyán beszélsz! – kapott szájához nagyim és fejét ingatta rosszalóan.

Majd szétvetett a düh, nagy volt a kísértés, nagyihoz vágjam, ő inkább ne szóljon semmit. Anya kitette a lelkét, ő meg, ha rájött a hoppáré, ott rúgott belé, ahol éppen kedve tartotta!

Részemről itt tért véget a látogatás, szégyentől és haragtól remegve kiléptem a szobából. Időben, nehogy túlságosan messzire menjek, bár ezt sem fogom odahaza zsebre tenni. Már mikor kimondtam, tudtam, ha hallgattam volna, bölcs maradtam volna. Ha a húgom, Petra is itt lett volna, ez mind nem történt volna meg. Ám ő még hétvégén is dolgozott, nem ért ma rá.

A társalgóban hat üldögélő időssel találtam magam szembe. Magányos, elfelejtett emberek, akik éheztek egy kis botrányra. Csodás volt, mondhatom!

Kivonultam a Félhold kicsiny, gesztenyefákkal szegélyezett udvarára, ahol az új dohányzási rendelet szerint már cigizni se lehetett, nem mintha füstöltem volna. Lehiggadni jöttem, de nem akart sikerülni. Lejátszottam magamban, anyám minék fog lehordani, és aztán majd apám is jól kiborul, ha megtudja, hogyan viselkedtem. Ráadásul az egész nem ért semmit, nem fog változtatni semmin.

Vajon én is így fogom végezni? Ha valaha lesz gyerekem, mire megvénülök és tehernek kezdenek érezni, bedugnak egy otthonba? Egyáltalán megélem azt, ennyire öreg legyek? A nyugdíjas korhatás már valahol 70 felé közelített, nagyobb esélyem volt a munkahelyemről a temetőbe kikerülni a nyugdíjas évek élvezete helyett. Bezzeg a nagy! 55 évesen elbúcsúztatták.

Felidéztem Petra szavait, akivel ezt a témát már kitárgyaltuk:

– Ha érzem, hogy kezdek megrokkanni, tuti hamarabb a távozás hímes mezejére lépek, semmint magatehetetlenül végezzem.

– Mondod most, de olyan idősen foggal-körömmel kapaszkodni fogsz az életbe.

– Majd meglátjuk. Minden esetre inkább nyiffantom ki magam, semmint egy ingerszegény otthonban sorvadjak el egy tucatnyi másik, megkeseredett vén csont társaságában!

Szélsőségesnek tartottam Petra véleményét, bár abban a jövőképben is volt valami taszító, amit lefestett.

– Szerintem az a baj, a mai öregek nem tudják betölteni a családban a bölcs tanácsadó szerepét, mint régen – magyarázta akkoriban, amikor anya latolgatta, nagyit otthonba teszi. – Túl nagy a generációs szakadék. Nézd anyát és az ő anyját: már közöttük is, innét a sok félreértés.

Én csak hümmögtem, ritkán filozofáltam az élet nagy dolgairól.

– Bernadett, gyere, megyünk! – vakkantotta mögöttem anyám karót nyelten. Veszekedés helyett a néma terrort választotta, de nem akartam a tudtára adni, ez inkább áldás volt nekem a nyavalygása helyett.

Mikor apám a kocsiba ülve megkérdezte, mi volt, kurtán annyit felelt:

– A lányod megint bemutatkozott. Soha többé nem jöhet velem.

A visszpillantóból kérdően rám nézett, hátha bővebben is kifejtem, de csak rántottam egyet a vállamon és kibámultam az ablakon. Anyám egész hazáig csendben volt, ami nála nagy szó. Csak mikor kiszálltunk, akkor nézett rám jelentőségteljesen:

– Előre tudom, tőled ne számítsak semmi jóra, ha megöregszem, minden Petrára fog maradni. Megmondtad már, hogy nem akarsz bajlódni velem, ha megbetegszem.

Végtelen nagy ürességet éreztem a mellkasomban, de nem azért, mert vérig sértett, hanem mert tudtam, ez tényleg így lesz. Tartsak akkora bárhol a magánéletemben, vagy a karrieremben, szeressem bármennyire az anyámat, nem fogom feladni az életemet azért, hogy magamhoz vegyem legyengülten.

Beismerni az önzőséget vajon jónak vagy rossznak számít?

Half-Hearted

Veronika Puska. Hungary

As soon as I saw the chocolate biscuits, the apples and the two sachets of instant coffee on the kitchen table, and my mother running back and forth between the kitchen and the bathroom in just her bra and knickers, I guessed immediately that I could kiss my plans of having a comfortable read in the afternoon goodbye. I could almost hear the sound of our car's engine revving up and in my mind's eye I was already sitting in the back seat.

"It's a good thing you've arrived, don't bother getting changed, we're leaving in a minute," said my mother, stopping suddenly to take a look at what I was wearing with a critical eye. The corner of her mouth twitched almost imperceptibly, a sure sign that she didn't like what she saw. "Did you go to work wearing that?" she said, staring at my trousers, which were a size larger than necessary and so were a bit slack. "Pull your belly in; don't stick it out like that!"

"Mother, I'm not a flat-chested 16-year-old any more, I was 28 last month, have you forgotten?" I looked at her with a bored expression and bulged out the shameful body part even more just to annoy her. It was the usual argument between us; she just couldn't accept the fact that her slim, teenage daughter had become a normally built woman. Well, perhaps five kilos heavier than normal. It's a pitiful cliché, isn't it? All that stands in the way of happiness and a woman's self-esteem are those five kilos!

"Where are you going?" I asked totally pointlessly, because I knew very well that mother usually went mad like this when she was getting ready to go to the old people's home.

"As if you didn't know. To visit mum," she said, dashing into the living room, which doubled as my parents' bedroom. A few seconds later she emerged with a pair of trousers, and when she had put them on she noted, pursing her lips, that while she usually had to have her clothes taken in at the waist, it would seem that it was time to start letting them out. It's the kind of family we were: everything centred on weight! Woe betide those who don't look their best! As if we should be determined on the basis of how much we weigh!

The only thing more important was the cynical and often jealous observation of others for fear of missing out on who's bought a new car, who's going on holiday abroad this year, or at whose expense we can spread some juicy, local gossip! The all-seeing eye of the neighbours was one of the least heart-warming aspects of life in a small town.

"You could help you know, instead of just standing there!"

She wasn't in a good mood, and to forestall my becoming the object of her anger I unenthusiastically went to the closet and got the basket we usually packed things for granny in. Apart from the things on the table, we also packed some home-cooked food – not as if they didn't cook well or enough at the home, but mum insisted on it – three pairs of brand new warm socks and four pairs of woolly knickers. Granny always had cold feet, even in the middle of summer. With the underwear in my hands I stopped to think for a second. Will I be running around in this sort of thing when I'm old, or do only old school pensioners wear them?

I was packing quietly, while mother was running around like a headless chicken. First she couldn't find her purse, then her glasses; next she just couldn't fasten her watch with one hand. Even my father, who usually didn't get involved in the feverish preparations, noticed her nerves.

It was enough for him to ask her what the matter was, and from then on all the way to the old people's home I had to listen to how, if the price of granny's medicine and the monthly boarding fee went up again, we'd have to have a serious think about bringing her out of there. Dad again had his vote, declaring that he wouldn't consent to it and if granny came, he'd go, or to be more precise would move home to his mother who lived in the next street.

Footnote: according to my experience so far, the further away relatives live from each other, the better their relationship.

Well, we couldn't say the same about ourselves; my paternal grandmother lived practically next door but she saw me and my mother as rarely as if we lived on the other side of the country, and even my mother's mother was enjoying her retirement just two villages away. Enjoying it? I'd argue with that I think. The right word for it would be vegetating.

I'd have just sat there quietly, but I heard mum mention that in fact the reason we're visiting granny for the second time this month is because the home called.

"What would happen if we lived in Timbuktu and they played at this? Dragging us in every couple of weeks just because they feel like it? If there's a problem, there's the phone, why don't they just tell us! This paying for the medicine cash in hand is so stupid too!" I grumbled. "These days everyone does this kind of thing by bank transfer!"

I could have had more sense and knew very well this was the kind of comment

that would really annoy mother, but I'd had enough of them using and exploiting her. She may have been 55 already, but she just couldn't say no.

Mum started going on about why they'd agreed on things this way with the director of the home, but I knew very well why she kept giving in to them again and again. Last time, granny hurt her feelings by complaining that while everyone else there gets visitors every week, her own daughter only appears once a month at best.

This was just such a lie that I'm amazed she wasn't swallowed up by the earth when she uttered it. Apart from her, the relatives of the other old fogies only thought of them perhaps once a year, and even then it was usually just a phone call to the charity home to enquire if the "beloved relative" was still alive or not. It was charming how they waited around like vultures for them to pass away so they could finally get their hands on the supposed inheritance.

Mother too had been scorned for being such a heartless daughter to have put her own mother into a home. As an only child it was her duty to take care of her whether she wanted to or not. But mother at least had the courage to see that she could only do her duty at the expense of her job, her family and her own mental health, and so she managed to arrange to have her accepted in a home that was run by someone she knew.

I was witness to the fact that in the last two years poor granny's health had become gradually worse and unfortunately we couldn't leave her alone because of her increasingly serious senile dementia. We tried home care, but her deteriorating condition required twenty-four hour supervision.

Although we knew why we had made certain decisions, others didn't prove to be understanding, and my granny knew exactly how to play at the strings of my mother's guilty

conscience. This was one of the reasons my mother got in such a state when we were getting ready to visit the home. What does granny have in store for us today, I wonder? Will she again bring up how my mother could have done this to her? Or that the nurses keep stealing and her companions are unbearable?

“Just let it go. She does it on purpose because she knows she can hurt you by saying those things,” I told my mother. At times like these she would stare out of the window with her lips pursed, from which I deduced that somewhere deep inside she agreed with my grandmother.

I shook my head. If she’s made a decision she should just stick by it instead of fraying her nerves away with this continuous doubt: *Did I make a good decision? Was I right to do what I did?* This irresolvable situation will be the death of her one day.

It was with a heavy heart that I stepped across the lime tree lined threshold of the Half Moon Old People’s Home. It wasn’t the smell of age or the sight of those dilapidated and lonely old men and women that bothered me, not even the crumbling paint on the ceilings, but the fact that I had to face what had become of the active, always in the garden, cake and meatloaf-baking grandmother of my childhood.

She was already waiting for us, leaning on her stick in a dressing gown at the top of the stairs on the second floor. Her short grey hair was set in pretty curls around her head; she must have had a perm that week, although on the left her pillow had flattened it down a little. Granny had never been tall but in her old age she had shrunk, if it were possible, even more. When I was a child I used to make fun of her a lot because of her belly, because I didn’t yet understand that it was my future that stood before me. The women of our family were prone to gaining weight around the waist.

Mother donned her fake smile for her own protection and began to fuss around her. She accompanied her to her room, which she shared with two other old ladies, sat her down on the edge of the bed, unpacked what we had brought, and even found time to talk to the nurses about her condition and any expenses due.

Dad didn’t come in to see her; he stayed outside in the car. The home itself was properly tended, but it hadn’t been built in the best area. The town lived off mining at one time, and once the pits were closed down poverty became rife. Security wasn’t particularly bad, but the devil never sleeps, as they say. He decided that he’d give us a ring if we hadn’t come out in an hour’s time; that was more than enough. He hoped granny wouldn’t have enough time to get annoyed.

After discussing the usual question of what we had brought, she turned her pallid eyes to me.

“You’re looking well, Bernadette.”

I stayed silent. What could I have replied to that?

“Have you found a job yet?”

She’d gone right for the jugular; granny wasn’t afraid of making waves.

“No, not yet,” I replied slowly. It bothered me enough already that I was increasing the ranks of unemployed graduates.

“But she’s taking part in a public work programme,” stressed my mum, so granny wouldn’t think I was sitting at home scratching my arse and living off welfare. With a grimace I nodded in agreement. In Hungary, social welfare for the unemployed was dependent on doing public work, and if you didn’t cooperate with the state you didn’t get a penny.

“And what do you do?”

“I’m working as an office assistant.”

And I was having a relatively good time of it. I knew people more qualified than me who had been forced to sweep the streets.

“She’s looking for a job all the time, but she hasn’t found one that suits her yet,” my mother continued. I would have gladly added that in the profession my mother had dreamed up for me I certainly wouldn’t. We had very different views about what I should do with my life.

“Mum’s still pushing for me to be a biologist,” I said irritably. “She doesn’t understand that it’s too late now. I got my degree five years ago and I haven’t worked a day in my profession, my knowledge is pretty dated by now.”

“You could be working as one if you’d listened to me, and if you’d wanted it enough,” said mother with a cutting glance.

“Well, we’ve certainly seen a good example of perseverance and ambition from you: instead of being an archaeologist you ended up a nursery school teacher,” I retorted viciously.

“Things will improve girl,” said granny, her voice shaky with age. “And, have you got a boyfriend yet? You’ll soon be too old to have babies.”

Mother swallowed her resentment and replied instead of me to this one too:

“No, not yet. It’s hard for youngsters to meet people nowadays.”

“You’re not a lesbian though, are you?” asked granny, leaning closer, and my eyebrows jumped up high.

“You’re wearing trousers now too, I see, and you’ve so many lovely skirts! And you’ve cut your hair short too...”

Mum had been sitting with her hands in her lap, but now the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes became deeper and she stared at granny.

“Mother, how can you say things like that?”

I hadn’t taken it to heart, I was smiling absently.

“Don’t worry granny, I’m as far from being a lesbian as you can imagine. Perhaps

if I had less brains and more silicone and style in me, I’d have a boyfriend.”

“You would have style, but you don’t care about your looks. Your manners leave a lot to be desired too.”

“I’m not going to pretend to be someone I’m not.”

“Oh, don’t! Be proud and single! It’s all the fashion anyway, isn’t it! When I was your age, I’d been a mother for a good few years; you were already seven.”

“So what? When you were my age there weren’t even mobile phones yet.”

“Now, now!” said granny, raising a finger. “Don’t talk to your mother like that; she’s just worried about you.”

“Well she needn’t worry; I’ll sort things out myself.”

“Of course, that’s why you’re still living with us,” mother blurted out, ruining my mood for good. This was the other thing that really bothered me apart from not having a job. Moving back to your parents’ house when you were all grown up was more than embarrassing.

“I’m sorry the two months became a whole year, but I haven’t got a stack of money saved up to be able to just go and live in some apartment in the city on impulse and start looking for a job and hope I get lucky!”

“Then what *do* you want? There are no opportunities for young people where we live! You should go down to Budapest, you’ve got cousins there too.”

“Screw my cousins!” I exclaimed. “We’ve never been on good terms. We may be relatives by name, but otherwise we’ve never cared about each other! It’d be lovely to start sucking up to them now and asking them for help!”

“Stop shouting! What will people say?” said mum, her eyes sparkling in anger. “Is this why we came here?!” she hissed.

But it was too late to stop me, everything that was on my mind just rushed out:

“And you could stop making oblique references to the fact that you think I should grab hold of some rich husband! I’m not going to organise my life like my second cousins, who only cared about the size of their men’s wallets and are kept women! I’d rather live in poverty and keep my self-respect than with a load of money as a whore!”

“Oh Bernadette! Don’t use such horrible language!” said granny, covering her mouth with her hands and shaking her head disapprovingly.

I was seething with anger and felt a great urge to tell granny that she would do better to keep quiet. Mum did everything she could for her, but if she had one of her turns, granny would give her a nasty kick at every opportunity.

This is where I decided to end the visit, and stepped out of the room shaking with shame and anger. In time not to have gone too far, although I was sure I’d get what was coming to me when we got home. As soon as I’d said it, I knew I’d have been wiser to have stayed quiet. If my younger sister Petra were here, none of this would have happened, but she worked weekends too and didn’t have time to come with us today.

In the dayroom I found myself confronted with seven old people sitting on their sofas. Lonely, forgotten people who hungered for a bit of scandal. It was wonderful, I can tell you!

I went out into the Half Moon’s small chestnut-lined courtyard where according to the new smoking laws you couldn’t even have a cigarette any more, not that I was a smoker. I came here to calm down, but it just wasn’t happening. In my head, I played the tape of how my mother was going to tell me off, and then dad would get angry too if he heard how I’d behaved. And on top of it all, there was no point to any of it, nothing was going to change.

Would I end up like this too, I wondered? If I ever have a child, get old and they start to feel I’m a burden, will they stick me in a home? Will I even survive long enough to become this old? The age of retirement was approaching 70; I had a better chance of going to the cemetery directly from my workplace rather than living to enjoy my retirement. Not like granny! They held a retirement party for her when she was 55.

I recalled Petra’s words, with which we had already discussed this topic:

“If I ever feel that I’m starting to become decrepit, I’m damn sure I’ll leave for the happy hunting grounds before I end up unable to look after myself.”

“You might say that now, but when you’re that old you’ll cling on to life with all your strength.”

“We’ll see. Whatever happens I’d certainly prefer to top myself rather than waste away in an uninspiring home in the company of a dozen other bitter old farts!”

I thought Petra’s opinion was a bit extreme, although there was something repulsive in the vision of the future she had painted too.

“If you ask me, the problem is that old people today can’t fill the role of wise advisor in families like they used to,” she used to say back when mother was thinking of putting granny in a home. “The generation gap’s just too wide. Just look at mum and her mother; even between them. That’s the reason for all the misunderstandings.”

I just mumbled something. I rarely philosophised about life’s important issues.

“Come on Bernadette, let’s go!” barked mother behind me as if she’d swallowed a rake. Instead of arguing she had chosen silent terror, but I didn’t want her to know that this was a godsend to me rather than her constant complaining.

When we got in the car and dad asked how things had gone, she curtly replied:

“Your daughter was on form again. She’s never coming here with me ever again.”

He looked at me questioningly through the rear-view mirror hoping I’d explain a little more, but I just shrugged my shoulders and stared out of the window. Mother was quiet all the way home, a rarity for her. Only when we had got out of the car did she look at me meaningfully:

“I know very well that I can’t count on any help from you when I get old; Petra’s going to have to cope on her own. You’ve

already told me you don’t want to have to bother with me if I get sick.”

I felt an immense emptiness in my chest. Not because I was deeply offended by what she had said, but because I knew things really would have been that way. Wherever I stood in my private life or my career, and no matter how much I loved my mother, I would never give up my life so I could take her in when she needed looking after.

Is admitting being selfish a good or a bad thing, I wonder?

The Lollipop Fields

Jamie O'Connell. Ireland

Soaring upwards, little swayed by draft or cool current, the silver balloon became a shimmering dot in the sky. A little girl jumped, thrusting her hands into the air, hoping she might catch the string that floated behind. But it was too late. The balloon was gone. Next to her, a freckled boy looked guilty. Blue eyed, black fringe and small shorts, he shuffled on the spot, shrugging his shoulders.

“You said you’d catch it!” she cried. But the balloon had been too quick.

Convinced of his own speed, the boy had released the balloon. He reached upwards, caught the string and dragged it back down. The dare was repeated. He lingered a little longer before jumping, grabbing the fleeing cord. Success! A dizzying rush of blood to the head. He opened his hand again. The balloon soared.

Overconfident, he waited too long to catch it. The balloon took its chances and escaped upwards, out of reach. The upstairs windows, the roof tiles and chimney pot, all sleepily warm in the afternoon sun, didn’t notice as the balloon climbed ever higher. Up and up it went, into the infinite blue sky. Against the wall, the little girl cried. The orange day baked heat into the rough burnished bricks as her tears dripped onto the concrete path. It seemed that the silver balloon would be impossible to forget, soaring further and further into the heavens, more unreachable with every moment.

In the cool hours of the evening, the boy tried to cheer his little sister. In his hand he held an offering. Little slivers of silver lay on his fingers; his own balloon he had ripped to pieces. It would never fly. Like tinsel, it shimmered as it fell to the floor. He did not deserve a balloon if she was to be miserable.

The lollipops grew in the field on Sundays. The children’s father ventured outside into the dewy garden, making sure all the greedy gnomes had gone, before allowing the girl and boy to pick the delicious fruit. The tiny child fidgeted with excitement, as her father buttoned up her light jacket and tucked it up around her neck. His cold wet hands rubbed off her throat, making her shiver excitedly.

“Were there many lollipops today?” she asked. “Had the birds taken too many?” He smiled and kissed her forehead, which wrinkled with momentary anxiety.

She and her brother ran outside. The breeze drifted over the grass as she gazed at the garden. Scattered all over the lawn, between the daisies, round lollipops peeked out of the ground. Vibrant red, soft pink, tangy yellow and citrus green, they grew up like jewels out of the soil.

The dew sparkled on her shoes, as she ran from jewel to gem. The air clouded and floated upwards with each breath. Bits of earth stuck to the lollipops’ stems, as she plucked them out of the earth. She brushed the dirt off and slipped the delicious fruit into her mouth.

What novelty, what life, what exquisite joy! A world of lollipop fields, silver balloons and tinsel corpses. The little girl looked upwards, remembering her balloon, soaring ever higher.

She'd almost forgotten it. How far away was it now? With the stars? Maybe it'd been caught by a passing plane? No, it soared upwards forever!

On Saturday nights, she stared out of her window, waiting for the gemlike fruits to start lifting out of the soil but none appeared. Her eyes grew heavy and millions of stars – possibly escaped silver balloons – urged her to sleep. Yet, every Sunday, lollipops grew on a carpet of green, rising out of a world of magic. Maybe her balloon would reach the top of the sky, then what? Would it poke through the darkness and appear in another world, a lollipop out of the soil?

The field of hay was dry; the girl and boy, a little older, played in the dregs of summer. Billowing clouds frowned as they whisked across the horizon. The air was gusting and sharp, ready to burn flesh and wear stone. The grass rustled and rippled, the trees sneezing and shaking as they became brown and dry.

Hoods up, trousers on, the children raced through the long grass. It caught their legs and feet, dragging them to the ground. All flushed cheeks and bright eyes, they fell onto the waves of grass. A black Labrador bounded after them, barking.

Looking upwards at the sky, the girl watched the stalks sway from side to side. They curved slightly, weighed down by rows of heavy seeds at their tip. She plucked a blade and ran her thumb and index finger up the wiry stem, watching as the seeds burst off like a fountain, falling on her face.

Shaking her head, she knocked the seeds onto the earth, spitting one out of her mouth. She could feel the wind push against her back, forcing her to her feet, dragging her as hard as it could. Her heart pumped hot blood through her limbs, the cool air filling her lungs.

The black Labrador bounded between the children, barking excitedly. He jumped up at her brother, pushing and jostling. But the boy didn't want to be left behind his younger sister. He pushed the dog aside. The black dog persisted. The boy's face grew redder with impatience.

"Stop barking," he exclaimed, growing irritated. He ran forwards, ignoring the Labrador. The dog, misunderstanding the boy's annoyance, leapt up, nipping the boy's hand with his teeth. Crimson blood flooded out.

The boy roared in shock. The fluid dripped from his hand onto the golden grass. The dog, realising he had caused pain, crept forward to give comfort. The boy's face reddened with anger. He lifted his foot and kicked the dog hard in its side. The dog whined, a fearful look in his eyes, yet ready to return to the angry child. The boy kicked the dog again. The little girl cried. She ran up the fields, the hot tears running down her cheeks. The field, the rustling grass and roaring winds became unexpectedly savage.

Later, her brother was sent to his room by their father, a prisoner for his crimes. The scar on his hand was cleaned and wrapped. The kind dog forgave, the lollipops grew and the balloon continued higher.

The little girl grew taller. Teenage. Awkward. Lightly sleeping, she heard muffled voices in the kitchen. She turned over. The light above the doorway lit her room with defused shadows. Her eyes opened.

Raised voices. Disturbance. Outside her bedroom door, footsteps frantically moved. Sick to the stomach, she threw back the covers. She reached for the handle of the door, walking down the narrow hallway, rubbing her eyes. The lights were blinding. The kitchen door swung open.

“Get sick, you stupid bastard!” her father shouted, his voice breaking with fearful emotion. He looked at her. It was the first time she’d heard him swear. There was terror in his eyes. Next to him, leaning over the sink was her brother, damp hair stuck to his pale cheeks. His eyes rolled backwards. Beside them, sitting on the table, were empty bottles of tablets.

Dazed, the girl turned to the telephone. Her father shouted about an ambulance. Her hand stretched out but it couldn’t reach, the phone moving further away. Her head grew light. Her legs caved, knees weak, and she felt herself fall silently downwards into darkness.

The church smelt of lilies. The little girl, now grown, sat by her mother, watching her brother at the altar with a rose in his buttonhole. Smart, tall, slightly lined, he only faintly resembled the little boy she remembered. Time passed; he had moved away, their relationship was one of childhood memories, where every feeling had been magnified – the overwhelming pain of scraped knees, the torture of vegetables, the joy of sweets, and running so hard her chest might burst.

Now it was all order. Routine. Responsibility. Had he felt the same? She’d never asked. Weekend breaks and occasional holidays left little opportunity to know a person. People became snapshots, growing faintly older with each visit and occasion. Painful reminders of time passing.

The joy of the occasion vanished, replaced by an ache. It wasn’t time passing that seemed terrible, rather it was the loss of connection, the feeling of isolation, realising the nearest people to her were almost strangers. Her brother, once such a confidant, was now unfamiliar. The distance, once indistinguishable, had become worlds apart. The youth they had shared, wily balloons and silver corpses were just memories.

Her mother patted her hand. She looked old. Reclining in her ear was an ugly beige machine, plastic yet necessary. Their father was long since gone – a stroke and his time had been counted. Now no lollipops grew in the garden. Time made fools of them all.

The organ began to play. The congregation stood up. She turned to look at the rear of the church; the wooden doors opened. The bride entered. In a dazzling orange wedding dress.

“Thank god your father’s dead,” whispered her mother, not knowing the level of her voice. People turned and looked. The girl smiled.

This was life. Time would pass, as would people. Eventually memories would become nothing but shimmering silver dust. Yet, one balloon remained soaring, heedless of the world calling it back.

Zilo acu stāsts

Agnija Kazuša. Latvijas Republika

Agrais un vēsais marta rīts pāršalca vieglus drebuļus, liekot Annai Kārkliņai tik pierasto rīta soli apdarīt žiglāk kā parasti: gotiņai siens, minkām piens, sunim kauliņi no iepriekšējās dienas zupas, vistām un viņu pavēlniekam Peķkinam graudi. „Man ir deviņas mutītes, ko barot, un es pati desmitā,” viņa mēdza teikt. Barot no rīta, pusdienā un vakarā. Pārliecinājusies, ka visiem ir ko ēst un mutītes kust, Anna žigli ieskrēja istabā. Vai tas bija vēsums, kas viņu dzina iekšā vai tomēr šalkas no pagātnes un šalkas par nākotni, kas viņu tagad biedēja? Mazmeitai kuru katru brīdi vajadzētu būt klāt, viņa pie sevis domāja un neparasti nervozi sāka krāmēties ap somu, kas jau iepriekšējās dienās bija sakrāmēta, skatīties pulkstenī, pārskaitīt naudu, pārlūkot dokumentus. *Kaut varētu uz pusstundiņu apgulties*, viņa domāja, bet miegs nenāca. Tas nebija nācis arī visu iepriekšējo nakti...

„Čau, ome. Vai esi gatava?” pēc vairākām minūtēm nemiera, kas mājāja Annas sirdī, viņa dzirdēja savu mazmeitu pavisam ikdienišķi sakām. Liene bija ienākusi istabā, kamēr viņas mašīna stāvēja pagalmā.

„Jā, jā... gatava, gatava,” Anna nepārliecinoši atbildēja. *Gatava, gatava... viņai galvā joprojām skanēja. Vai toreiz viņi maz pajautāja, vai esmu gatava? Nē. Steigā un neziņā, ar bailēm par nākotni...*

„Tad ejam uz mašīnu,” Liene mudināja, sagrābjot rokās vecmamma mantas un virzot viņu transportlīdzekļa virzienā tā it kā tas būtu kāds ierasts svētdienas izbrauciens uz tirgu.

„Pagaidi, es tā nevaru,” ome apstājās, verot vaļā mašīnas durvis.

„Nav laika, braucam,” mazmeita bija steidzīga.

„Nu, pagaidi,” ome zināja, ka Lienei to grūti saprast. „Man jāaiziet pie lopiņiem, vismaz pateikt, ka aizbraucu.”

Anna žigli ieskrēja kūtī. Tur mājāja vistas un gotiņa. Arī kaķi bija ienākuši iekšā un kā parasti „maisījās pa kājām”. Visi, izņemot Džeri, kas pie ķēdes, bija sapulcējušies kā uz tādu ģimenes sapulci, it kā kaut ko nojauzdami.

„Tā, nu es tagad aizbraucu. Uz nedēļu. Bet Ritas tante jūs pabaros,” Anna glaudīja gotiņu, cieši skatīdamās lopiņa acīs. Likās, ka tā viņu saprot. Lai kā Anna centās sevi savaldīt, viņas zilās acis palika udeņainas, un pāris lāses nobira pār vecās sievietes rievotajiem vaigiem. Slaukot asaras (jo nevēlējās, ka mazmeita tās redz), viņa izgāja vēl ārā pie Džera, iedodot tam ķepu un pēdējo reizi atsveicinoties. „Ak tu, muļķa sunīt, tu domā, ka es kā katru rītu nāku ar tevi sasveicināties. Vai tu maz atšķirtu sasveicināšanos no atsveicināšanās? Nekas, drīz tu sapratīsi. Bet

es būšu atpakaļ,” viņa stingri noteica un, vairīdamās vēl ilgāk atskatīties uz saviem mīluļiem, viņa žigli gāja uz mašīnu. *Toreiz mēs tā arī viņus vairs neredzējām. Kur viņi palika? Nomira bada nāvē?* Prātoja vecā sieviete, šķīroties no lopiņiem, kas bija kļuvuši par viņas labākajiem draugiem un ikdienu...

Ilgāk vairs nevarēja gaidīt. Anna paklausīgi iesēdās mašīnā, un garais brauciens varēja sākties. Vēl nekad viņa nebija izbraukusi no dzimtās Latvijas kopš toreiz pēc septiņiem moku gadiem atgriezās mājās. Toreiz pēc Sibīrijas. Toreiz labākas sajūtas nevarēja būt: mājās un dzimtenē. Tāpēc tieši toreiz viņa nosolījās: vairs nekad, nekad negribu nonākt svešumā! Tagad viņa šo solījumu lauza. Viņas dēļ. Alises dēļ.

Viena nedēļa, un es jau būšu atpakaļ, viņa sevi mierināja. Lai arī tā diena – 25. marts – tuvojās, tas nebija kā toreiz, 1949. gadā, kad viņa, septiņgadīgs bērns, kas tikko uzsācis skolas gaitas, tika izsaukta klases priekšā, izrauta ārā un aizvesta uz vilcienu ar virzienu: nezināms. Lopu vagonos viņa toreiz brauca kopā ar mammu un tēti un daudzām citām latvju ģimenēm, saspīestām vieniem pie otriem. Arī viņi nekā nezināja. Cilvēki turpat izkārņījās, mira, un līķi tika sviesti ārā kā tādi salmu maišeļi, nevienam neaizdomājoties par to, ka tie taču ir cilvēki.

Nē, tagad bija citādāk. Viņa centās sev stāstīt, lai gan nevarēja pretoties atmiņām, kas kā uzplēstas rētas par sevi atgādināja. Tagad viņa sēdēja jaunākās mazmeitas Lienes glaunajā mašīnā un bija ceļā uz Briseli, kur strādāja viņas vecākā mazmeita Alise. Vecmamma nekad nesaprata, ko viņa tur darīja tajās Briseles augstajās mājās un kantoros, bet tuvojās 25. marts. Laikam Eiropa kaut ko rīko, un Alise, kas tur koordinēja pasākumu, bija uzaicinājusi savu vecmammu dalīties pieredzē un pastāstīt par savām atmiņām jauniešiem, kas vēstures lappusēs nekad neizlasīs, ko Anna Kārkliņa un tūkstošiem citu ģimeņu pārcieta tālajā 1949. gadā. Alise to zināja. Mazmeita vecmammā stāstu bija dzirdējusi vairākkārt un tagad gribēja, lai to uzzina jaunieši no citām valstīm pasākumā, ko viņa rīkoja.

Vienmērīgā ātrumā mašīna traucās uz priekšu un drīz tuvojās Latvijas robežai ar Lietuvu. *Viena jau es nebūtu braukusi, domāja Anna Kārkliņa. Nemūžam!* Tas, ko viņa tagad savos 70 gados darīja, bija pārsteigums viņai pašai. Tas bija liels uzdrošinājums un morāli grūts solis. Taču Alise bija vai no ādas līdusi ārā, kamēr viņai beidzot bija izdevies vecmammu pārliecināt. „Nē, lidmašīnā tu mani nedabūsi. Viņas taču krīt,” Anna toreiz bija teikusi, tāpēc Alise bija noorganizējusi, ka viņas jaunākā māsa aizved vecmammu ar mašīnu.

Dzimtenē taču ir vislabāk, Anna atcerējās sarunu ar mazmeitu īsi pirms viņas pārceļšanās uz Briseli. Vai tu maz zini, kā ir, kad tev atņem dzimteni? Aizden prom, izrauj ar saknēm un liek iesakņoties svešumā? Anna toreiz mazmeitai bija teikusi. Tagad jauniešiem dzimtene ir brīva un neatkarīga. Tā pieder viņiem, taču viņi to pamet labprātīgi. Aizbrauc un bieži pat neatgriežas.

Tā arī viņas vecākā mazmeita. Pirmā un vismīļākā mazmeitiņa Alise. Pirms diviem gadiem, kad viņas abas sēdēja uz dīvēna malas kopā ar vecmāmiņu viņas šaurajā, tumšajā istabā, Anna neparko negribēja laist Alisīti prom. Gribējās ielikt skapī un paturēt. Paturēt pie sevis. Taču mazmeita skaidroja par iespējām un Briseli, viņas jauno darbu, starpautiskumu un globalizāciju, vārdus, kas Annai neko neizteica. Vārdus, ko viņa nesaprata.

Toreiz, kad Alise pateica savu lēmumu, vecmamma lūpas pēkšņi savilkās, un asaras sāka tecēt pār baltajiem, rievainajiem vaigiem, vecajai sievietei skatoties uz savu mazmeitu un domājot: *mani paņēma no skolas sola, man lika aizbraukt, man lika pamest dzimteni, kamēr mana mazmeita to dara labprātīgi – brauc prom uz svešu zemi.*

„Kāpēc tu raudi?” Alise bija vaicājusi. Vecmamma acīmredzami juta, ka mazmeitai netik viņas asaras, ka jaunā dāma vēlētos tikt saprasta, taču bija sajūta, ka viņas nevarēja viena otru saprast. Vecmamma bija centusies apspiest savas asaras. *Kaut nebūtu jāraud. Man jāvaldās. Es raudāšu viena. Kopā ar Peķkinu un Muri pie sāniem. Bet ne tagad. Ne viņas klātbūtnē. Viņa nesaprot manas asaras. Viņa grib, lai es smaidu, lai atbalstu, tomēr es to nespēju.*

„Vai jums ir tomāti?” vecmamma ierunājās, paskatoties uz sulīgajiem sarkanajiem dārzeniņiem uz galda, ko kāda draudzene viņai bija atnesusi lielā vairumā. Patiesībā viņa tos atrada kā citu tēmu, ar ko aizslaucīt birstošās asaras.

„Jā, šovasar visiem tomāti pa pilnam,” meitene tikai noteica.

„Nevar viņus vairs ieēst, jau apnikuši,” vecmamma piekrita.

Tad viņa piegāja pie skapja un izņēma no tā rūpīgi salocītas piecu un desmitlatu banknotes. Viņa sniedza tās mazmeitai.

„Nē, taču nevajag,” Alise spītīgi turējās pretī.

„Ņem, ņem, kam tad man vajag? Es lūpas nekrāsoju un šņabi nedzeru. Kam tad man tā nauda? Tikai tu esi svarīga. Galvenais, lai tev ir labi,” viņa domāja par mazmeitu vairāk nekā sevi pašu. „Es jau esmu veca, nekam nevajadzīga,” viņa bieži to mēdza teikt un atkārtoja arī toreiz, kad abas sēdēja uz dīvēna malas un domāja par to tagad, kad brauca Lienes mašīnā. *Vienkārša lauciniece. Vecene, kas Sibīrijas dēļ nekādu labo izglītību nav ieguvusi. Nekas vairāk. Pat neticami, ka tagad mans stāsts kādam mūsdienās interesē. Varbūt kādam palīdzēs.* Nu viņa pavisam dabiski lauza solījumu pēc Sibīrijas vairs nekad nepamest Latviju, vairs nekad neuzticēties nevienam ārzemniekam. *Viņi tikai Latvijai sliktu grib, tā Anna domāja.* Un ko gan citu sieviete, kas pārcietusi Sibīrijas mokas, varētu domāt?

Alise centās vecmammu saprast. Tai pat laikā mazmeita gribēja viņai parādīt citu pasauli. Pasauli ar labiem cilvēkiem, labiem ārzemniekiem, tādiem, kas ieinteresēti viņas stāstā. Jā, Alise zināja, ka viņas vecmamma ir vērtība un vēlējas viņai to pateikt. Taču toreiz tajā tumšajā istabiņā, kur abas sēdēja uz gultas malas, likās nekādas nespēs aizgānāt skumjas un asaras, kas visu laiku tika valdītas. Cik ļoti žēl viņai bija vecmammu pamest un izstāstīt, kā jūtas. Cik daudz arī viņa domāja par to, ka varētu viņu vairs neredzēt... Un tomēr Alisei bija jādzīvo – jādzīvo sava dzīve un jāspēr šis tālais un nezināmais solis tur plašumā. Sirds pēc tā sauca, tomēr nevēlējās pamest vecmammu. Kaut varētu daļu no sevis paturēt viņas šaurajā, tumšajā istabiņā. Tā toreiz Alise domāja.

Marta vidū Briselē jau elpoja pavasaris. Koki, krūmi un pumpuri bija gatavībā plaukt un ziedēt, atnest jaunu un svaigu dzīvi. Bija svētdienas rīts. Alise sēdēja virtuvē un skatījās ārā pa logu. Vecmammai ar māsu vajadzētu iebraukt kuru katru brīdi. Kā pavasaris, kas nes jaunu dzīvību un dod jaunu sparū gan dabai, gan cilvēkiem, Alise cerēja būs vecmamma stāsts jauniešiem no dažādām valstīm, kuri apmeklēs pasākumu „Dzīvā vēsture”. Tajā daudzi veci cilvēki dalīsies pieredzē par viņu atmiņām, dzīvi un pagātņi, rādīs fotogrāfijas un centīsies jauniešiem uzburt citādas vēstures lappuses, atdzīvināt vēsturi. Alise zināja, ka viņas vecmamma stāstu par Sibīriju būtu jānoklausās un jādzird tālāk par viņas mazo, šauro istabiņu meža ielokā kur viņa dzīvo un, iespējams, atstāta savu ikdienu gotiņai, Peķkinam, minkām. Viņa zināja jau tad, kad redzēja, cik saskumusi ir vecmamma, Alisei paziņojot par viņas lēmumu braukt strādāt uz Brisele, ka Alise to tā neatstās. Viņa nesamierināsies ar faktu, ka vecmamma jūtas nevajadzīga, ka uzskata savu dzīvi par nevērtīgu, ka cieš no agrā jaunībā zaudētās mātes, kura atgriezās no Sibīrijas slima un nomira un tēva, kurš Sibīrijā kļuvis aklis, aizgāja drīz pēc tam. Alise nekad nedomāja, ka viņas vecmamma būtu nekas. Viņa redzēja viņā vērtību, dzīvību un žirgtumu, kāds viņai piemita, rūpējoties par lopiņiem un piegādājot tantēm pienu. Par Sibīrijas laiku viņa nesūdžējās un nevienu nevainoja. Pieņēma to kā faktu un samierinājās, klusi ciešot. Alisesprāt, vecmamma bija cilvēks ar vistīrāko un šķīstāko dvēseli. Nevienam ļauna viņa nekad negribēja, un viedāku cilvēku par savu vecmammu meitene nebija satikusi. Tik dzīves gudru!

Un varbūt viņa tāda nav vienīgā? Iespējams kādā nomalē, aizmirstā būdīnā slēpjas vēl daudz tādu stāstu, kuri tiek stāstīti lopiņiem un mīluļiem, jo mums jaunajiem jau nav laika...bet kuri patiesībā būtu jānodod jauniešiem. Alise gribēja parādīt, cik vērtīgi ir vecie cilvēki, kas mums dzīvo apkārt un cik vērtīgi ir viņu stāsti, no kuriem mēs, jaunieši, varam mācīties.

Lienes mašīna piebrauca pie Alises dzīvokļa, un meitene skrēja ārā, lai sagaidītu savu vecmammu Briselē. Tur viņa sēdēja, iespiedusies mašīnā un lēnām taisīja vaļā durvis. *Cik neparasti*, domāja Alise. Cik lepna viņa jutās par šo mirkli!

„Kas to būtu domājis, Alisīt, ka tu mani līdz pašai Briselei atdzīsi,” vecmammai teica, ieraugot savu mazmeitu. Abas māsas ar omīti kāpa augšā uz Alises dzīvokli, kur meitene bija sagatavojusi brokastis. Vecmamma savukārt bija atvedusi latviešu rupjmaizi un medu. Tik ideāli. Kā mājās. Domāja Alise. Viņa baudīja šo brīdi un vēlējās to paildzināt. Viņa redzēja prieku vecmamma zilajās, spīgtajās acīs un saprata, ka šajā brīdī viņai svarīgāk ir satikt savu mazmeitu nekā apzināties, kurā pasaules malā tas notiek.

„Pietrūkst mums tevis. Tu nenāc pie manis vairs pēc piena. Vai te tu svaigu pienu maz dabū?” vecmamma bažījās.

„Jā, jā, ir labs piens te. Pērku,” mazmeita atbildēja, zinot, ka nekur pasaulē piens nebūs tik labs kā tas, ko slaukusi vecmamma no savas gotiņas un nekur nebūs tik labi kā mājās, tomēr tā nu šī dzīve bija iekārtota.

Naktī uz 25. martu Anna gulēja nemierīgi. Ne tikai tāpēc, ka bija citā valstī, bet tāpēc, ka zināja, nākamās dienas datums ir 25. marts. Diena, kas toreiz 1949. gadā bija apgriezusi viņas dzīvi

kājām gaisā, pārmainījusi par simt procentiem. Kad viņa sagaidīja drēgnu un pēlēku, nedaudz apmākušos 25. marta rītu Briselē, viņa neapzinājās, ka arī šī diena pārmainīs viņas dzīvi un uzskatus.

Ierodoties notikuma vietā, Anna redzēja daudz vecu cilvēku. Vecu un jaunu. *Cik neparasta aina*, viņa domāja. Vecīši kopā ar jaunajiem. Bieži tā nebija redzēts. Pat viņu represēto ikgadējās tikšanās Latvijā bija tikai veco bariņš. Viņa domāja, ka mūsdienu jaunieši ir pārāk aizņemti un skrienoši, lai apstātos un ieklausītos. Tomēr te parādījās cita aina. Viņa lepojās ar savu mazmeitu, kas šo visu bija noorganizējusi, lai gan sākotnēji Annas attieksme līdz pat brīdim, kad viņa ieradās Briselē, bija skeptiska un negribīga.

Anna tika pieteikta mājīgajā telpā un sagaidīta ar ieinteresētiem skatiem, ziņkārīgām acīm, kas mirdzēja no jaunavīgajām sejiņām. Viņa apsēdās neparasti mīkstā un glaunā krēslā un mazliet nervozi sāka sevi iepazīstināt. Lai arī Anna runāja latviski, viņa tika saprasta, jo stāsts tika tulkots. Saprasta Briseles gaitenšos, saprasta šajā starptautiskajā konferencē. „Tas bija 1949. gads, un es mācījos 1. klasē...” Viņa savu stāstu zināja no galvas, un viņai tas vairs nelikās sevišķs – tieši otrādi uzjundīja atmiņas par badu. „Atceros, ka visu laiku gribējās ēst. Nekad nebija gana. Mana mamma vispār neēda, lai man pietiek.” Annas sejā likās atdzīvojas septiņu Sibīrijas gadu emocijas – bailes un neziņa aizbraucot, asaras par badu un mammas slimību, kas beidzās ar drīzu viņas aiziešanu, smieklī par to, ka Sibīrijas vasarās akmeņi bija tik karsti, ka uz tiem varēja pat olu izcept. Anna dzīvoja savā stāstā, savās atmiņās un viņas seja ar spilgtajām zilajām acīm padarīja to par dzīvu vēsturi arī jauniešiem, kas viņā uzmanīgi klausījās.

Alisei bija tādas pašas zilas acis. Dzirdot savu vecmammu runājam, tās mirdzēja. Mazmeita jutās lepna. Vecmammā stāsts kā aizsporstots ūdens tagad tecēja un tecēja, nevienam nemanot kā paiet laiks. Stāsts, kas tika stāstīts mazajā, šaurajā vecmammā istabiņā, abām sēžot uz dīvāna malas un glaudot minkas, kas turpat blakus gozējās, tagad atbalsojās šeit, Briselē, konferenču telpā, jauniešu klātbūtnē, kas pacietīgi un uzmanīgi klausījās un redzēja, kā 70 gadus vecā sieviete piepildās ar pozitīvismu, daloties ar to, kas viņai ir, to kas viņai dārgs, lai arī skumjš. Alise redzēja, kā mainās vecmammā pasaule un izpratne par āzerniekiem, kā viņa saprot, ka tādi paši vien jaunieši kā Alise ir jaunieši no Vācijas, Somijas, Francijas un Ēģiptes, klausoties ar interesi un uzdodot jautājumus. Šī būs jauna pieredze, ko Anna izstāstīs „mājiniekiem” – Peķkinam, gotiņai, minkām un Džerim.

Blue Eyes' Story

Agnija Kazuša. Latvia

The early and cool March morning swept in with slight shivers, causing Anna Kārklīņa to complete her customary morning chores faster than usual: hay for the cow, milk for the pussycats, bones for the dog and yesterday's soup for the hens, while their master Lord Peck, the rooster, got a handful of grain.

"I have ten mouths to feed, and I, myself, am the tenth," she used to say.

Mouths to be fed in the morning, at noon and in the evening. Having made sure that everyone had enough to eat and mouths were busy chewing, Anna hurried back into her room. Was it the cold weather that forced her inside or intimations from the past or the future that now frightened her? Her granddaughter was to arrive at any moment now, she thought to herself, and feeling atypically nervous, she began to rifle through her travelling bag, which had already been packed over the past few days, kept looking at her watch, recounting her money and checking her documents.

"If only I could have a nap for about half an hour," she thought, but sleep wouldn't come. It also hadn't come the night before...

After several minutes of the anxiety that had gripped Anna's heart, she heard her granddaughter saying in her customary calm voice "Ciao, granny. Are you ready?" Liene had entered the room, having parked her car in the yard.

"Yes, yes... ready, ready," Anna replied unconvincingly. *"Ready, ready..."* echoed still in her head. *"Did they even ask me if I was ready that time? No. Then in a mad rush and in uncertainty, with fear about the future..."*

"Then let's go to the car," Liene urged, picking up her grandmother's things and steering her onward in the direction of her vehicle as if it were a regular Sunday trip to the market.

"Wait, I can't go like this," grandma stopped as she was opening the car door.

"There's no time. Let's go," the granddaughter was in a hurry.

"Wait a minute," grandma knew that Liene found it hard to understand. "I have to go to my animals to tell them at least that I'm leaving."

Anna ran hurriedly into the barn. This is where the hens and the cow were kept. The cats too had come inside and as usual "were underfoot". Except for Jerry, the dog who was chained up outside, all the animals had gathered as if for a family conference, as if sensing something.

"I'm leaving now. For a week. But Aunt Rita will feed you," Anna patted the cow, gazing deeply into her eyes. It seemed that the cow understood her. No matter how Anna tried to control herself, her blue eyes got watery, and a few tears rolled down the old woman's wrinkled cheeks. Wiping them away (because she didn't want her granddaughter to see her crying), she went out to see Jerry, who gave her his paw to shake, in a final farewell.

"Oh, you foolish little dog, you think that I'm coming to say hello to you as I have done each morning. Can you even tell the difference between a hello and a goodbye? Never mind, you'll soon understand. But I'll be back," she firmly said and not wanting to look back at her loved ones, she quickly re-

turned to the car. *“That time we never saw them again. What became of them? Did they die from starvation?”* The old woman wondered, as she parted from her farm animals, which had become her best friends and her daily concern...

They couldn't delay any longer. Anna obediently got seated in the car, and now the long drive could begin. She had not left her native Latvia since returning home after those seven tortuous years. That time, after deportation to Siberia. Then no better feelings could be imagined: to be home in her native land. That is why she swore that time: never, ever again to be exiled! Now she was breaking this oath. For her sake. For Alice.

One week, and I'll be back again, she comforted herself. Although that date – 25th March – was approaching, but it wasn't as it had been then, in 1949, when she, a seven-year-old child just starting school, was called to the front of her class, pulled outside and taken to a train to be driven in an unknown direction. She, together with her mamma and father and many other Latvian women and children, were herded into cattle cars, squeezed into a small space. And none of them were told where they were being driven. Everybody had to take care of their natural needs right there in the cattle car. Some died and the corpses were thrown out like bags of hay, with their captors not caring that these were human beings.

No, now it was different. She tried to tell herself but she couldn't resist her memories, which like open, raw wounds painfully reminded her of the past. Now she was sitting in the elegant car of her youngest granddaughter Liene on her way to Brussels, where her eldest granddaughter Alice worked. Grandma had never understood what they did in those high buildings and offices in Brussels, but 25th March was close at hand. Perhaps Europe was organizing something,

and Alice, who was coordinating the event there, had invited her grandmother to share her experiences and to recount her memories to young people, who would never read in history books what Anna Kārklīņa and thousands of other families suffered in that long ago 1949. Alice knew it. The granddaughter had heard grandma's story already many times and now she wanted young people from other countries to hear it at the event she was organizing.

The car raced forward at a constant speed and soon was about to reach the border of Latvia with Lithuania. *“I wouldn't have gone alone,”* thought Anna Kārklīņa, *“Never!”* What she was doing now at the age of 70 was a surprise even to herself. It was very daring and emotionally a hard step for her to take. But Alice had leaned over backwards, until she had convinced her grandma.

“No, you won't get me on a plane. They crash, don't they?” Anna had said at the time. That is why Alice had arranged for her younger sister to drive their grandmother in her car.

“It's best to be in our homeland,” Anna recalled her conversation with her granddaughter shortly before Alice moved to Brussels. *“Do you even know what it's like when your native land is taken away from you? To be driven away, pulled up by your roots and made to settle in a foreign land?”* she had said to her granddaughter at the time. *“Now the young people's homeland is free and independent. It belongs to them, yet they leave it voluntarily. Leave and often don't return.”*

Her oldest granddaughter had also done this. Her first and best loved granddaughter Alice. Two years ago, when the two of them, Alice and grandma, had sat on the edge of the bed, in Anna's narrow, dark room, Anna didn't want in any way to let Allie leave. She wanted to put her in a closet and keep her with her. Keep her in

her house. But her granddaughter explained about the opportunities and about Brussels, her new work, about internationalism and globalisation, words that meant nothing to Anna. Words she didn't understand.

When Alice had told her of her decision, grandma's lips suddenly trembled, and tears started to roll down her white, wrinkled cheeks, as the old woman looked at her granddaughter and thought: *"I was taken from my school bench, made to leave, made to abandon my homeland, while my granddaughter does it of her own free will – she's leaving to go to a foreign land."*

"Why are you crying?" Alice had asked. Grandma obviously felt that her granddaughter didn't like her tears, that the young lady wanted to be understood, but she had a feeling that they couldn't understand each other. Grandma had tried to suppress her tears. *"If only I didn't want to cry. I have to control myself. I'll cry when I'm on my own. Together with Lord Peck and Purr at my side. But not now. Not in her presence. She doesn't understand my tears. She wants me to smile, to support her, but I can't."*

"Do you have tomatoes?" grandma spoke up, looking at the juicy, red vegetables on the table, a large quantity of which a woman friend had brought her. In fact, she chose them as a different topic with which to wipe away her tears.

"Yes, this summer everyone has too many tomatoes," the girl said.

"I can't bear to eat them any longer, I've grown tired of them," grandma agreed.

Then she went to the cupboard and took out carefully folded five and ten lati notes. She reached out to hand them to her granddaughter.

"No, don't – there's no need," Alice stubbornly held back.

"Come on, take them, what do I need them for? I don't wear make-up and I don't

touch alcohol. What would I need money for? Only you are important. The main thing is that you are well," she said, thinking more of her granddaughter than herself.

"I'm old now, of use to no one," grandma used to say so often and repeated it again that time when the two of them were sitting on the edge of the bed, and she thought about it now as she was sitting in Liene's car. *"Just a simple farm woman. An old woman that because of deportation to Siberia had never had a decent education. Nothing more. It's even incredible that my story is of interest to anyone nowadays. Maybe it will help someone."* Now she naturally broke the oath made after returning from Siberia to never leave Latvia, never to trust another foreigner again. *"They only want bad things for Latvia,"* thought Anna. And what else would a woman who had survived the nightmare of Siberia think?

Alice tried to understand her grandma. At the same time her granddaughter wanted to show her a different world. A world with good people, good foreigners who were interested in her story. Yes, Alice knew her grandma to be a valuable human being and she wished to tell her that. But that time in the dark room, when both sat on the edge of a bed, it seemed then that nothing would chase away the sadness and the tears, which her grandma tried to suppress all the time. How very sorry she was to leave her grandma and how much she wanted to tell her how she felt. How much she had thought also about never seeing her again... But still, Alice had to live – had to live her own life and to take this big step into the vast unknown. Her heart demanded it, but she also didn't want to leave her grandmother. If only she could leave a part of herself in this narrow, dark room. That's what Alice thought then.

In mid-March the first breath of spring was in the air. Trees, bushes and buds were ready to blossom to bring new life and new

strength not only to nature, but also to people. And Alice was hoping that her grandma's story would be told to the young people from various countries who were going to attend the Living History event. In this event many old people would share their experiences about their memories, their life and their past, would show photographs and would try to conjure up different pages of history, to breathe life into history. Alice knew that her grandmother's story about Siberia had to be heard beyond the confines of her small, narrow room surrounded by the forest where she lived and where she possibly recounted the events of her day to her cow, to Lord Peck and the cats. Alice knew already when she saw how sad her grandma was at the time she announced her decision to go to work in Brussels that she would not leave her like that. She couldn't make peace with the fact that her grandmother felt useless, that she perceived her life as valueless, that she suffered from having lost her mother, who returned from Siberia sick and died shortly after, and for her father, who lost his sight in Siberia, and died soon after her mother. Alice never thought that her grandma was worthless. She saw the value, the life force and energy that she had, taking care of the animals and delivering milk to the aunts. She didn't complain about the time spent in Siberia and didn't blame anyone for it. She accepted the deportation as a fact, had come to terms with it and quietly suffered it. In Alice's opinion, grandma was a person with the most unblemished and purest of souls. She never wished anyone ill and a wiser person than her grandma the girl had never met. So worldly-wise!

And maybe she wasn't the only one like that? It was possible that in some corner of the world, in a forgotten hut hidden away were many such stories, told to farm animals and loved ones, because the young didn't have the time... but these stories needed to

be handed down to the young. Alice wanted to show how valuable the old people who lived nearby were and how valuable their stories were, from which the young could learn something.

Liene's car drove up to Alice's apartment building in Brussels and Alice ran out to meet her grandma. There she sat, huddled in the car – and then slowly opened the car door. *"How priceless this moment is,"* thought Alice. How proud she was of the moment.

"Who would have thought Allie dear, that you'd chase me all the way to Brussels itself," grandma said, on seeing her granddaughter. Both the sisters and grandma went up to Alice's apartment, where the girl had prepared breakfast. As for grandma, she had brought with her Latvian rye bread and honey. *"How perfect! Like back home,"* thought Alice. She relished the moment and wanted to make it last longer. She saw joy in her grandma's lively blue eyes and realized that at this moment it was more important for her grandma to meet her granddaughter than to be aware of where in the world she had arrived.

"We miss you. You don't come to my house for milk any more. Do you even get fresh milk here?" grandma said anxiously.

"Yes, yes, there's good milk here. I buy it," the granddaughter replied, knowing that nowhere in the world would milk be as good as the one that grandma had milked from her cow and nowhere would it be as good as it was at home, but life had arranged itself thus.

The night before 25th March Anna had slept restlessly. Not only because she was in another country, but also because she knew that the next day was 25th March. The day that in 1949 had turned her life upside down, changed it one hundred percent. As she rose to a humid and downcast morning in Brussels, she was not aware that the same day would also have changed her life and perspective.

Arriving where the event was going to take place, Anna saw many old people. Old and young people. “*What an unusual scene,*” she thought. Old folks together with youngsters. Even at the annual meeting of the “repressed” – as the people were called in Latvia who had been deported to Siberia and had returned – there were only old people. She thought that the young people of today were too busy and always in a rush to be able to stop and listen. But here a different scene met her eyes. She was proud of her granddaughter, who had organized it all, although Anna’s attitude even up to the very moment when she arrived in Brussels had been sceptical and unwilling. Anna was introduced in a comfortable meeting room and met with interested looks and curious eyes that shone from youthful faces. She sat down on an unusually soft and elegant chair and somewhat nervously began to talk. Although Anna spoke in Latvian, she was understood, because what she said was translated. She was understood throughout the corridors of Brussels, understood in this international conference.

“It was the year 1949 and I was a student in grade 1...” She knew her story by heart, and it didn’t seem special to her any more – exactly the opposite, it raked up memories of starvation.

“I remember how I was constantly hungry. There was never enough. My mamma basically didn’t eat so I would have enough.” The emotions of seven years of deportation in

Siberia came to life and played out on Anna’s face – the fear and uncertainty at the time of departure, tears about starvation and her mamma’s illness, which soon ended in her death, laughter about how hot the stones were in Siberia in the summer – so hot that you could fry an egg on them. Anna lived her story; her memories and her face with her striking blue eyes transformed it into living history for the young people listening to her as well.

Alice had the same blue eyes. On hearing her grandma speak, her eyes shone. The granddaughter felt proud. Grandma’s story like dammed up water now broke free and poured out, with no one noticing the passing of time. The story that had been told in grandma’s small narrow room, while the two of them sat on the edge of the bed stroking the cats, was now being heard in Brussels in a conference hall, in the presence of young people, who patiently and attentively listened and witnessed how a 70-year-old woman was filled with a sense of self-worth, sharing what was precious for her, although it was also very sad. Alice saw how during the speech her grandma’s world and perception of foreigners was changing and how she understood that the young people from Germany, Finland, France and Egypt, as they listened with interest and posed questions, were the same as Alice. This would be a new experience, which Anna would describe to her “folks back home” – Lord Peck, the cow, the pussycats and Jerry.

Ιστορία Σεξουαλικότητας

Αντρέας Δ. Κουτσογιωρκής. Κύπρος

Ανέπνευσε βαθιά και ξεκίνησε να διαβάξει: «... Οι αρχαίοι Έλληνες φρονούσαν ότι η ίδια η επιθυμία απευθύνεται σε καθετί που είναι επιθυμητό, είτε αυτό είναι αγόρι είτε κορίτσι...»¹

Σήκωσε το κεφάλι του, τον κοίταξε και πρόσθεσε, «Είμαστε όλοι λάτρες του ωραίου μπαμπά... Δεν σου φαίνεται πολύ λογικό; Μας αρέσει αυτό που ικανοποιεί τις αισθήσεις μας.»

Καθάρησε λίγο το λαιμό του και συνέχισε με στόμφο αυτή την φορά: «...Θα πρέπει μάλλον να αναρωτηθούμε με ποιο τρόπο και με ποια μορφή η απόλαυση μεταξύ αντρών μπόρεσε να αποτελέσει πρόβλημα γιατί με λίγα λόγια ενώ επρόκειτο για μια πρακτική πολύ διαδεδομένη, έγινε εντούτοις αντικείμενο μιας ηθικής έγνοιας ιδιαίτερης και ιδιαίτερα έντονης σε βαθμό τέτοιο που να βρεθεί επενδυμένη με αξίες, επιτακτικές εντολές και...»²

«Γεια σου, Γιώργο» τον διέκοψε η Άννα, η αδερφή του, που μόλις μπήκε μέσα στον θάλαμο. «Τι διαβάζεις στον μπαμπά;»

«Γεια σου μπάμπα» απευθύνθηκε αυτή την φορά στον μπαμπά της, η Άννα και του έπιασε το χέρι. Ο μπαμπάς όμως δεν σάλεψε, αφού βρισκόταν σε κατάσταση κόμα. Ήταν τώρα μια βδομάδα που επέστρεψε ο Γιώργος από τις σπουδές του, μαζί με τον Όλιβερ, ένα συμφοιτητή του, αλλά ο μπαμπάς μετά την επιστροφή του γιου του έπαθε ξαφνικά εγκεφαλικό επεισόδιο και βρισκόταν στο γενικό νοσοκομείο εδώ και τρεις μέρες κλινικά νεκρός.

«Δεν μου είπες τι διαβάζεις στον μπαμπά;» επανέλαβε η Άννα αφού δεν πηρε απάντηση.

«Την «Ιστορία της Σεξουαλικότητας» του Φουκώ» είπε ο Γιώργος κάπως συνεσταλμένα...

«Μ' αυτό που αναλύει την ομοφυλοφιλία;» ρώτησε η Άννα ξαφνιασμένη.

«Ναι».

«Είσαι με τα καλά σου; Διαβάζεις στον μπαμπά, Φουκώ;»

«Ναι, γιατί όχι; Ο γιατρός άλλωστε είπε να του μιλάμε γιατί του κάνει καλό», διαμαρτυρήθηκε ο Γιώργος.

«Ο γιατρός είπε να του μιλάμε, όχι να τον βομβαρδίζουμε με ιδέες που δεν μπορεί να αποδεκτεί. Γι' αυτό περνάς τόσες ώρες με τον μπαμπά; Του κάνεις σεξουαλική διαπαιδαγώγηση;»

«Του λέω αυτά που έπρεπε να ξέρει ήδη».

Ο μπαμπάς τους ο Κυρ Γιάννης ανήκε στην γενιά των Κυπρίων που μετά την Τουρκική εισβολή του 1974, έκανε λεφτά αφού δούλεψε σκληρά στις οικοδομές, δημιούργησε ένα επιτυχημένο εργοτάξιο και ανέλαβε μεγάλες δουλειές. Άντρας βαρύς της παλιάς γενιάς, και όπως συνήθιζε να λέει κοροϊδευτικά: «γεμίσαμε από πνευματικά άρρωστους που πηδάνε αγοράκια», εννοώντας φυσικά ότι αυξήθηκαν οι γκέι στην σύγχρονη Κυπριακή κοινωνία.

Ο Γιώργος και η Άννα ήταν τα μόνα παιδιά του Κυρ Γιάννη, αγαπημένοι και οι δύο του μπαμπά τους, μα ειδικότερα ο Γιώργος, ο μονάκριβος γιος του Κυρ Γιάννη.

«Του λες δηλαδή ότι είσαι γκέι, τώρα που δεν μπορεί να σε ακούσει;» του επιτέθηκε η Άννα.

1. 2. Αποσπάσματα από το βιβλίο του Μισέλ Φουκώ, Ιστορία της Σεξουαλικότητας, Η χρήση των απολαύσεων, Εκδόσεις Ράππα

«Ο Γιατρός μου είπε ότι μπορεί να ακούσει και να επεξεργαστεί τα πάντα».

«Ναι, αλλά δεν μπορεί να αντιδράσει».

«Ακριβώς! Γι'αυτό είναι ευκαιρία να ακούσει ότι είμαι πούστης και να το χωνέψει. Πούστης!» επανέλαβε ο Γιώργος χαιρέκακα σκύβοντας στο αυτί του μπαμπά του, για να είναι σίγουρος ότι το άκουσε.»

«Έλα σταμάτα!» του είπε η Άννα και τον χτύπησε ελαφρά στον ώμο. «Τι λες στον μπαμπά;»

«Την αλήθεια! Είναι κάποια πράγματα που πρέπει να τα πω.»

Ο Γιώργος από τα δεκαπέντε του χρόνια είχε νοιώσει ότι η σεξουαλική του ταυτότητα τον καλούσε να την εξερευνήσει. Γι'αυτόν δεν ήταν όλα τόσο προφανή όπως έλεγε ο μπαμπάς του, δεν ήταν όλο το νόημα της ζωής του, «μια γυναίκα, μια οικογένεια, ένα σπίτι». Γι'αυτόν δεν ήταν ένα και ένα ίσον δύο, αλλά κάτι περισσότερο από αυτό. Στα είκοσι του χρόνια αφού έκανε και την στρατιωτική του θητεία που τον υποχρέωνε η Κυπριακή Δημοκρατία να κάνει, έφυγε από την Κύπρο για να σπουδάσει νομική στο Λονδίνο. Εκεί σ'αυτή την μεγάλη μητρόπολη της Δύσης ανακάλυψε και τον πραγματικό του εαυτό. Το Λονδίνο, τον δίδαξε το πιο σπουδαίο μάθημα της ζωής του, ότι η διαφορετικότητα είναι πλούτος και όχι καποιο κουσούρι ή κάποιο μειονέκτημα, όπως πίστευαν στην επαρχιακή πόλη όπου μεγάλωσε. Στο Λονδίνο κατάλαβε ότι είμαστε όλοι ίσοι μα και όλοι διαφορετικοί και ο καθένας από εμάς μοναδικός. Έτσι λοιπόν ο Γιώργος μέσα σε μια πόλη εκατομμυρίων ανθρώπων, διαφορετικών μεταξύ τους, που κανένας δεν έκρινε κανένα για την εμφάνιση και την συμπεριφορά του, αντιλήφθηκε πως ο καθένας έχει την δικιά του αλήθεια και όχι την αλήθεια της κοινότητας του. Στο Λονδίνο, «απελευθερώθηκε» όπως συνήθιζε να λέει. Το μόνο πρόβλημα ήταν ότι η οικογένεια του δεν ήταν καθόλου απελευθερωμένη με οτιδήποτε δεν άρμοζε στα ήθη και τα πιστεύω της μικρής τους πόλης, και ειδικότερα ο πατέρας του που θεωρούσε την ομοφυλοφιλία αρρώστια του εγκεφάλου.

«Και τώρα βρήκες να του το πεις που βρίσκεται σε κόμα.» τον επέπληξε πάλι η Άννα.

«Πως να του το έλεγα.. αφού ξέρεις πως σκέφτεται!»

«Και του το λες τώρα που είναι φυτό.»

«Ξέρεις τι, νομίζω; Ότι εγώ είμαι η αιτία που ο μπαμπάς είναι σε αυτή την κατάσταση».

«Τι εννοείς;» ρώτησε η Άννα ανήσυχα.

«Την μέρα που έπαθε εγκεφαλικό ήταν η τελευταία μέρα του Όλιβερ στην Κύπρο».

«Δεν το πιστεύω,» επενέβη ξανά η Άννα «σας είδε; Δεν συμφωνήσαμε ότι δεν θα κάνετε τίποτα στην Κύπρο.»

Η Άννα ήταν η μόνη που ήξερε όλη την αλήθεια για τον αδερφό της, το Γιώργο. Κανένας άλλος δεν γνώριζε ότι ο Γιώργος ήταν ομοφυλόφιλος και κανένας δεν γνώριζε ότι ο Όλιβερ που φιλοξένησαν τις προηγούμενες μέρες σπίτι τους δεν ήταν απλά ένας συμφοιτητής του Γιώργου αλλά ο σύντροφος του και συγκάτοικος του τα τελευταία δύο χρόνια στο Λονδίνο.

«Δεν κάναμε τίποτα εκτός από μια φορά που νομίζω μας είδε και ο μπαμπάς.» συνέχισε ο Γιώργος. «Ήταν η τελευταία νύχτα πριν φύγει ο Όλιβερ και καθώς ετοιμαζόμασταν να φύγουμε για το μπαρ, μέσα στο αυτοκίνητο εγώ και Όλιβερ φιληθήκαμε. Μετά από ένα τέταρτο με πήρε τηλέφωνο η μαμά, ότι ο μπαμπάς έπαθε εγκεφαλικό. Έκει που βρήκαμε τον μπαμπά, στο παράθυρο του σαλονιού που βλέπει στον δρόμο, εκεί είναι το μόνο σημείο που μπορεί να δει κανείς τα αυτοκίνητα στον δρόμο από το σπίτι.»

Η Άννα δεν απάντησε.. έμεινε σκεπτική να βλέπει τον μπαμπά με ένα λυπημένο ύφος και προσθεσε μετα απο λίγα δευτερόλεπτα σιωπής: «καλά λένε ότι το σώμα μας αντιδρά όπως

αντιδρά για να μην τρελαθούμε. Ο καημένος ο μπαμπάς ίσως να προτιμούσε να πέθαινε παρα να μάθει τέτοιο πράμα για τον κανακάρι του».

«Ναι, αλλά δεν είναι νεκρός βρίσκεται σε κόμα», πρόσθεσε έντονα ο Γιώργος, «όλα γίνονται για κάποιο λόγο! Εσύ δεν μου το έλεγες αυτό; Ότι μας συμβαίνει, συμβαίνει για κάποιο λόγο. Είμαι πεπεισμένος πως αυτό συνέβηκε για να προσαρμοστεί με την ιδέα ότι ο γιος του είναι γκέι.»

«Γι' αυτό του κάνεις διαλέξεις για την σεξουαλικότητα εδώ και δύο μέρες;»

«Ναι, γιατί άμα είναι να κρύβομαι και να προκαλώ τόση αναταραχή σε εμένα και στους γύρω μου, καλύτερα να πω την αλήθεια.»

«Τέλοςπαντων, τα λέμε μετά αυτά, έρχεται η μαμά τώρα!» τον διέκοψε η Άννα.

«Θα της το πω και αυτής» είπε ο Γιώργος.

Εκείνη τη στιγμή μπήκε και η μάνα τους με μία πλαστική σακούλα με μπισκοτάκια απο το ζαχαροπλαστείο.

«Τι θα πεις και σε εμένα Γιώργο» είπε και τους ξάφνιασε και τους δύο.

Ο Γιώργος και η Άννα πάγωσαν, δεν απάντησε κανείς. Η μαμά τους η κυρά Λουκία μια βετεράνος νοικοκυρά που η μεγαλύτερη της απόλαυση ήταν οι σαπουνόπερες στην τηλεόραση και τα φινάλε των ριάλιτι, είχε ένα παρακλητικό βλέμα που δεν σου άφηνε επιλογή από το να ομολογήσεις όλη την αλήθεια.

«Μαμα είμαι γκέι» είπε απότομα ο Γιώργος.

«Τι είσαι;» ρώτησε την ώρα που προσπαθούσε να τοποθετήσει τα μπισκοτάκια στο κομοδύνο δίπλα από το κρεβάτι του μπαμπά.

«Γκέι.»

«Μάλιστα» είπε αδιάφορα και συνέχισε την προσπάθεια της να βάλει τα μπισκοτάκια κάπου στο κομοδύνο.

«Μαμά» επενάιβηκε η Άννα, «άκουσες τι σου είπε μόλις τώρα ο Γιωργος;»

Η Μαμα γύρισε και την είδε ατάραχη χωρίς να καταλαβαίνει τι συνέβαινε.

«Μαμα είμαι γκέι», επανέλαβε ο Γιώργος. «Ο Όλιβερ που έμενε σπίτι μας είναι ο γκόμμενός μου.»

Η κυρα Λουκία έμεινε και τους έβλεπε αποσβολωμένη, λες και δεν μπορούσε να συλλάβει και να επεξεργαστεί την συγκεκριμένη πληροφορία.

«Είναι ομοφυλόφιλος μαμά, πως το λέτε, πούστης», πρόσθεσε η Άννα έντονα.

Και τότε η Κυρά Λουκία λές και της πέταξαν στο πρόσωπο ένα κουβά νερό, είπε έντονα «Τι πράμα; Σσσιωπή μην σας ακούσει ο μπαμπάς σας! Σιωπή. Ότι έχετε να μου πείτε, να μου το πείτε μετά στο σπίτι».

The History of Sexuality

Andreas D. Koutsoyorkis. Cyprus

He took a deep breath and started to read: "...The ancient Greeks believed that desire itself addressed anything that was desirable, be it a boy or girl..."¹

He raised his head, looked at him and added: "We all adore beauty, papa... It makes sense doesn't it? We like something when it satisfies our senses."

He cleared his throat and continued overbearingly: "...We should consider how and in what form the pleasure enjoyed between men was problematic... In short, given that it was a widespread practice and the laws in no way condemned it and its attraction was commonly recognized, why was it the object of a special and especially intense moral pre-occupation? So much so that it was invested with values, imperatives, demands..."²

"Hello Giorgos," interrupted his sister Anna, entering the room. "What are you reading to papa?"

"Hi papa," Anna said addressing her father and taking his hand, but papa didn't move as he was comatose. It had been a week since Giorgos had returned from his studies with Oliver, a fellow student, but father had suffered a sudden stroke after his son's homecoming and had been clinically dead at the general hospital for three days now.

"You didn't tell me what you're reading to papa," Anna repeated, not having had an answer to her question.

"*The History of Sexuality* by Foucault," Giorgos replied a bit timidly.

"The one that analyses homosexuality?" Anna queried in surprise.

"Yes."

"Are you kidding? You're reading Foucault to papa?"

"Yes, sure, why not? The doctor said to talk to him. It's good for him," Giorgos protested.

"The doctor said to talk to him, not to bombard him with ideas which he can't accept. You're spending all this time with papa to give him sex education?"

"I'm telling him what he should already know."

Their father, Mr Yannis, belonged to a generation of Cypriots that, after the Turkish invasion of 1974, had made their fortune through hard work in construction. He had built a successful business taking on important projects. A heavyset old fashioned man, he often said mockingly: "We're full up with the mentally disturbed who fuck little boys," of course referring to the increase in the numbers of gay people in current Cypriot society.

Giorgos and Anna were Mr Yannis' only children, beloved by their father, but especially Giorgos, Mr Yannis' only son.

"You're telling him that you're gay, now that he can't hear you?" Anna asked belligerently.

"The doctor said that he can hear and understand everything."

"Yes, but he can't react."

"Exactly! That's why it's an opportunity for him to understand and digest the fact that I'm queer. A poofter!" Giorgos repeated, spitefully lowering his face to his father's ear to be sure that he would hear.

1. *The History of Sexuality* by Michel Foucault, "The Use of Pleasure", Rappas Publications (Greek version).

2. Ibid.

“Come on, stop that!” Anna implored, slapping him lightly on the shoulder. “Think what you are saying to father!”

“It’s the truth! There are some things which must be said.”

Giorgos had felt a need to explore his sexual identity since he was fifteen. For him, things were not as obvious as his father had said: “A woman, a family, a home” was somehow not the ultimate purpose in life. For him it was something more than a matter of one plus one equals two. At twenty years of age, after having served in the army as required by the Republic of Cyprus, he had left to study law in London. There in that great western metropolis, he discovered his real self. London had taught him the most important lesson of his life, that being different is an asset, not some defect or disadvantage as believed in the provincial city where he grew up. In London, he had understood that we are all equal, all different and that every person is unique. Giorgos had thereby discovered in this diverse city of millions, where no one judged another by their appearance or behaviour, that each person has their own truth and not some truth imposed by society. He was “liberated” in London, he often said. The only problem was that his family was not liberated at all with anything that did not fit in with the morals and beliefs of their small city, especially his father, who thought of homosexuality as a disease of the mind.

“And now is the time to tell him, when he’s in a coma?” Anna reprimanded again.

“How could I tell him? You know how he thinks!”

“And you have to tell him now that he’s a vegetable?”

“You know what I think? I think that I’m the reason that papa is in this state.”

“What do you mean?” Anna asked anxiously.

“The day he had his stroke was the last day that Oliver was in Cyprus.”

“I don’t believe that,” Anna intervened again. “Did he see you? Didn’t we agree that you wouldn’t do anything in Cyprus?”

Anna was the only person who knew the whole truth about her brother Giorgos. No one else knew that Giorgos was homosexual, nor did anyone know that Oliver, who was a guest in their home during the days before the stroke, was not simply Giorgos’ fellow student, but his lover and roommate for the past two years in London.

“We didn’t do anything except for once, when I think papa saw us,” Giorgos continued. “It was the last night before Oliver left and as we got ready to leave for the bar, Oliver and I kissed in the car. After a quarter of an hour, mama called and said that father had had a stroke. We found papa at the living room window which looks out onto the street; it’s the only place in the house where one can see the cars in the street.”

Anna didn’t answer, remaining pensive, sadly looking at father and adding after a few moments of silence: “They’re right to say that the body reacts in the way it does to prevent us from going crazy. Perhaps poor father preferred to die rather than to learn such a thing about his only son.”

“Yes, but he’s not dead, he’s in a coma,” Giorgos added emphatically, “everything happens for a reason! Didn’t you tell me that? Whatever happens to us happens for a reason. I’m convinced that this happened for him to be able to adjust to the idea that his son is gay.”

“So that’s why you’ve been lecturing him on sexuality for the past two days?”

“Yes, because if I hide this and cause such problems for myself and those around me... isn’t it better to tell the truth?”

“Anyway, we’ll talk later; mama is coming now!” Anna interrupted.

“I’ll tell her too,” Giorgos said.

At that moment, their mother entered the room holding a plastic bag of biscuits from the pastry shop.

“What will you tell me too, Giorgos?” she asked, startling both of them.

Giorgos and Anna froze and no one answered. Their mother Mrs Loukia, a veteran housewife whose greatest pleasures were TV soap operas and reality show endings, had an imploring stare which left one no choice but to confess the entire truth.

“I’m gay mother,” Giorgos said abruptly.

“You’re what?” she asked while trying to put the biscuits on the bedside table next to papa.

“Gay.”

“Indeed,” she said indifferently, continuing her effort to place the biscuits on the side table.

“Mama,” Anna intervened, “did you hear what Giorgos just told you?”

Mother turned and looked, undisturbed, without having understood what was happening.

“Mother, I’m gay,” Giorgos repeated. “Oliver, who was staying at our house, is my boyfriend.”

Mrs Loukia stopped and looked at them dumbly, as if she couldn’t grasp or understand the concept.

“He’s a homosexual, mother, you know, a gay-boy,” Anna added categorically.

Then, as if someone had thrown a bucket of water in her face, she said vehemently, “What? Shush, don’t let your father hear you! Quiet. Whatever you want to say to me, you can tell me at home.”

Çiçekler Kurumuş Mudur?

Ömer Çiftçi. Türkiye

Elleri ve dizleri titriyor, koltuk ve sandalye kenarlarına tutunarak yürüyebiliyordu. Camın kenarındaki masaya doğru yöneldi, masanın kenarına ellerini dayadı, özenle masa örtüsünü düzeltti, derin bir nefes aldı ve yavaşça masanın yanındaki sandalyeye oturdu. Camdan dışarı doğru yüzünü çevirdi, iki eli dizlerinin üstünde bir müddet öyle bekledi, parmakları istemsizce küçük hareketlerde bulunuyordu, sonra başını öne eğdi, ellerine baktı ve varlığında kelimelerin hükmü olmadığı, tüm farklılıkların, eksiklerin üstünü örten, onları gizleyen Ahmet'in de içine sığınmaya çalıştığını sessizliği bozdu: “Rimah ne zaman gelecek oğlum” diye sordu.

Ahmet, gözleri halının üzerindeki motiflere dikilmiş bir şekilde “Gelecek Anne şimdii uçaktadır, bir saate kalmaz iner uçağı” dedi. Ahmet gözlerini halıdaki desenlerde gezdirmeye devam ediyordu. Annesi, titreyen elleri masanın üstünde, “Çok özledim yavrum, gelsin de göreyim onu.”

Öğlen güneşinin sıcaklığı etkisini kaybetmiş, odanın içerisi soğumaya başlamıştı. Ahmet, Annesinin soğuk alacağını düşünerek onu yavaşça cam kenarındaki masadan kaldırarak odanın ortasındaki kanepeye oturttu. Annesi koltuğa oturduktan sonra, bir süre nefesinin yerine gelmesini bekledi sonra “Oğlum o zaman Rimah’la birlikte yarın dedenin mezarını da ziyaret edelim olur mu? Yazık, mezarındaki çiçekler dahi kurumaya başlamıştır” dedi.

Ahmet “Tamam olur, annem” dedi ve mutfağa doğru yöneldi. Artık annesi ne diyorsa tamam olur diyordu; çünkü hafızası kuvvetini kaybetmişti muhtemelen bu gün söylediğini yarın hatırlamıyor olabilirdi. Ne anasının ne kendisinin günlerdir iştahı yoktu. Mutfak ruhsuzdu. Çünkü ruhunu, yani kadını kaybetmişti. Ahmet yemeği hazırlamaya koyuldu ama bu sıra dedesini ve mezarındaki çiçekleri düşünüyordu “Gerçekten kurumuşlar mıdır? O günü hala hatırlarım, sana dedemin Libya’daki inşaattaki ölüm haberini verdiğimde hiç ağlamadan odana gittin bir deste parayla geri dönüp, dedemin mezarını kendi toprağına, doğup büyüdüğü toprağına getirmemi soğukkanlılıkla bana tembihledin. Sonra odana girdin ve uzun bir süre çıkmadın. Dedemi ben hiç görmedim, sadece senden ne kadar dost canlısı bir insan olduğunu duyardım. Hep söyledin bir gün ölürse en sevdiği dostunun, onun gibi duvar ustası olan meslektaşı aynı zamanda can dostu olan arkadaşının yanına gömülmek istediğini. O kadar sever miydi dostlarını? Sen söylemiştin dostları için her şeyi göze alabilecek bir adammış. Ananem çok kızarmış onun bu kadirşinaslığına, yumuşak başlı haline, öyle derdin. Ne kadar acı öyle bir adamın ülkesinde kaçıp başka bir ülkede çalışmak zorunda olması. Nasıl bir zamandır ki, öyle dost canlısı bir adamı ölümle tehdit edip ülkeden kaçmasını sebep olabilmişler. Suçu şehrin göbeğinde bombalı intihar eylemi hazırlığında olan komşulardan birini polise ihbar etmiş olmasıydı. Polis son anda bu intihar eylemini önlemiş ama dedemin kimliğini gizli tutmayı becerememişti. Sonra da terör örgütü peşine düşmüştü. Gerisi malum...”

Yemeği ocağına koydu. Mutfağın kapasını doğru hafifçe başını uzatarak göz ucuyla annesine baktı, koltukta oturmuş televizyon seyrediyordu. Saatine baktı Rimah’ın uçağının inmesine az bir vakit vardı. Günlerdir annesi ile birlikteydi. Yanından hiç ayrılmıyordu. Doktorlar, anne-

si bilincini kaybetmeye başladığı günden sonra mutlaka birilerinin yanında olması gerektiğini söylemişlerdi. Ahmet o andan beri annesinin yanından hiç ayrılmadı. Annesini bilincini yitirmeye başlamasını görmek; Annesinin kendisi için yaptığı tüm fedakârlıklardan sonra onu böyle aciz ve güçsüz görmek... Bir çağın kapandığını, bir devrin sona erdiğini hatırlatıyordu ona. Bir haftada gözleri çukurlaşmış ve yüzü zayıflamıştı. Rimah'ın yanında olmasını istemiş, ondan Mısır'da su kaynakları üzerine yaptığı araştırmayı yarım bırakıp Türkiye'ye gelmesini istemişti. Rimah durumu öğrenir öğrenmez işlerini düzene koyup ilk uçakla geleceğini söylemişti. Şimdi geliyordu, Ahmet onun sıcaklığına, Kuzey Afrika güneşinin kavurduğu o esmer tenine sığınarak kendisini avutmak, acısını hafifletmek istiyordu.

Ahmet mutfakta sofrayı hazırladı, yemeğin altını kapattı Artık her şey hazır. Ama kendisi biraz yorulmuştu. Masaya oturdu boş sandalyelere baktı; uzun bir aradan sonra sofraya üç tane sandalye koymuştu. Sofra ona Rimah'ı annesiyle tanıştırdığı ilk günü hatırlatmıştı. ... karşında oturuyordu, utanıyordu, konuşmak istiyordu ama annem ne İngilizce ne de Arapça biliyordu. Rimah, sen konuşamıyordun ama annem seninle konuşuyordu. O hiç yabancılık çekmiyordu. "Al kızım Al bundan ye" "deyip duruyordu, sana iltifatlarda bulunuyor yüzüne gülümsüyordu. Aramızda İngilizce ve Arapça konuştuğumuz zaman dahi anlıyor gibiydi. Annemin gözlerini içi gülüyordu, yanakları al aldı. Onu hiç böyle görmemiştim, sen ve ben ikimiz de hayran kalmıştık, aynı zamanda tercüme ediyordum fakat bana ihtiyacı yok gibiydi. Seni çok seviyordu."

Rimah inmek üzereydi. Yüzüne hafiften bir su çarptı, oturma odasına gitti annesine sınıksı sarıldı. Uzun süre öyle bekledi. Öptü, kokladı. Sonra üstünü giydirdi. Yola çıkmaya hazır. Rimah'ı havalimanından alıp birlikte eve geri dönecektiler. Havalimanı çok uzak değildi. Ahmet annesinin koltuğa yerleşmesine yardımcı oldu. Kadıncağzın yüzü gülüyordu "Nereye gidiyoruz olum amcanı görmeye mi?" Rimah'ı havalimanından almaya gideceklerini çoktan unutuvermişti. Ahmet bir şey demedi. Arabayı çalıştırdı.

Havalimanına geldiğinde öğrendi ki Rimah'ın uçağı her zaman olduğu gibi gecikmeli geliyordu. Bir saat beklemeleri gerkiyordu. Ahmet arabaya döndü ve arabada annesiyle birlikte beklemeye başladı. Kadıncağz hiçbir şey merak etmiyordu, sadece camdan dışarı bakıyordu.

Ahmet'in gözü arabadaki küçük süs çiçeğine dalmıştı, dedesinin mezarını düşünüyordu. "Belediyeden iki çalışan vardı. Hiç konuşmuyorlardı. Tabutu omuzladıkları an, annem beni de sertçe dürtükleyip tabutu omuzlamamı istemişti. O an için gördüğüm manzara karşında şok olmuşum. Onlarca dilenci kadın köşe başlarında oturmuş, çocuklar ellerinde su bidonları mezarlığa ziyarete gelenlerin peşinden koşup onların yakınlarının mezarına su dökerek rızalarını kazanıp para kazanmaya çalışıyorlar, toz toprak içinde su taşımaktan elbiseleri çamur içindeydi. Önümden geçen bir adam üstünde para yok diye, elindeki poşetten salatalık çıkartıp bir çocuğa verdiğinde diğer tüm çocuklar başına üşüşmüştü. Küçük bir salata için. Kendimden çok utanmışım. Sonra mezarlığın içine doğru girdik. Ne korkunç bir kalabalık vardı. Koskoca bir mezarlık, mezarlar dip dibe adım atacak yer yok ve biz dedem için ayrılmış toprak parçasını arıyorduk. Ülkesinden kaçmak zorunda kalmış bir adamın kendi vatanında onun bedeni için ayrılmış toprak parçasını arıyorduk. Hiçbir mezar taşı birbirine benzemiyor, kimisin tarihi yüz yıla dayanıyor, kimisinin birkaç yıla. Doğunun mahşeri andıran o mezarlığında nerdeyse bölgenin tarihi yatıyordu. Bizimle birlikte gelen görevliye üzerinde isim yazmayan mezar taşlarını sormuştum. Kuzey Irak'tan gelen mültecilerin mezar taşlarıymış. Irak-Iran savaşından sonra

Kürtlerden intikam almak isteyen Saddam insafsızca ve insanlık onurunu hiçe sayarak kimyasal silahlarla Kuzey Iraktaki Kürtlere karşı saldırıya geçtiği zaman bazıları sınırı geçip Türkiye'ye sığınmıştı. Üzerinde isim olmayan sadece boş mermerler, tarih dahi yok... Bölgede yaşanan acıların küçük bir resmiydi onların isimsiz ve tarihsiz mezar taşları. Mülteciler... Onlar savaşta mağdur olanların en başından geliyordu. Mülteci olmanın acısını, evini, yurdunu, akrabalarını geride bırakıp gitmenin hüznü ve kendi memleketine duyulan bitmez tükenmez özlemin ne demek olduğunu ben anlayamazdım ama tanık olmak bile acı veriyordu. Tüm o isimsiz mezar taşlarından sonra dedemin mezarının burada ve üstünde isim yazılı olmasından dolayı Allah'a şükretmiştim. Ben bunları düşünürken annem hiç konuşmuyordu, gözlerinden akan gözyaşlarını silmeye dahi gücü yok gibiydi. Başını öne eğik, siyah başörtüsü ile nerdeyse yüzünün yarısını kapamış bir şekilde yürüyordu. Çok acı çekiyordu, belliydi. Onun gözyaşlarını görünce benim de gözyaşlarımın birden akı veriyordu yanaklarıma. Zor da olsa dedemin için hazırlanmış o toprak parçasını bulmuştuk. Görevliler tabutun içinden beyaz kefene sarılmış o masum vücudu çıkartıp yavaşça önceden kazılmış olan çukura koydular. Anneme bakmıştım o sıra, dudakları titriyordu. Gözyaşları yanaklarını nerdeyse tüm yüzünü ıslatmıştı. Yanına gidip ona sarılmıştım. Sadece dudakları değil, vücudu da sarsılıyordu, yüreği de dudakları gibi titriyordu.”

Ahmet Rimah'ın gelmiş olacağını düşünerek, annesine hemen geleceğini söyleyip arabadan indi. Annesinin emniyet kemeri bağlı ve arabanın kapıları kapılıydı. Korkulacak bir şey yoktu, beş dakikaya Rimah'ı da alıp arabaya geri dönecekti. Havalimanının çıkış kapısına geldi. Yıllardır beklediği gibi dış hatların kapsamında Rimah'ı bekliyordu. Ama şimdi her zamankinden daha sabırsızdı. İçinde bulunduğu durumda, onun üzüntüsünü paylaşabilecek Rimah'dan başka kimsesi yoktu. Fakat Rimah geciktikçe annesini arabada bıraktığı için endişelenmeye başlıyordu. Bir süre sonra arabaya geri dönüp Rimah'dan gelecek telefonu beklemeli miyim diye düşündü. Ama gelmek üzere olmalıydı. Daha dikkatli bir şekilde kapıdan içerilere doğru bakıyordu, birazdan gözükmeliydi. Endişesi artmaya başlamıştı, arabada annesini yalnız bırakıp buraya gelmekle hata yaptığını düşünüyordu ki Rimah kapıda gözükte. Ahmet'i görünce masum bir şekilde güldü, ama gülüşü yine de bir hüznü taşıyordu. Hızlı adımlar atarak Ahmet'in yanına geldi. Ahmet özlem gidermeyi sonraya bıraktı hemen kısa bir kucaklaşmanın ardından Rimah'ın valizini aldığı gibi kapıya doğru ilerlemeye başladı. Rimah neden acele ettiğini sordu. Ahmet kısaca annesinin arabada onları beklediğini ve bilincinin tam olarak yerinde olmayabileceğini bu yüzden endişelendiğini açıkladı. Rimah da endişelenmişti. Neyse ki araba çok yakına park edilmişti. Ahmet, arabayı ve ön koltukta oturmuş camdan dışarı doğru bakan annesini görünce rahatlamıştı. Hemen valizi bagaja koydu, bu arada Rimah ön kapıya doğru ilerliyordu. Ahmet bagaj kapağını kapattı ve bir birlerine sarılmakta olan annesi ile Rimah'ın yanına gidiyordu ki annesi birden Ahmet'e dönüp “Bu kız kim yavrum ?” dedi.

Would the Flowers Have Really Gone Dry?

Ömer Çiftçi. Turkey

Her hands and knees were trembling, holding on to the sides of chairs as she could barely walk. She faced towards the table next to the window, leaned on her hands as she smoothed the tablecloth and took a deep breath. Then, she slowly sat on the chair next to the table. She turned her face to the window and sat there like that with both her hands holding her knees for a while. As her fingers were moving involuntarily, she bent her head, looked down at her fingers and eventually broke the silence that concealed all the differences and imperfections that Ahmet himself also wanted to take refuge in, upon which words had no effect:

“When will Rimah come, son?” she asked.

With his eyes staring at the patterns on the carpet, Ahmet said: “She will be here soon, must be on the plane right now. It should land in about an hour.” He continued staring at the figures on the carpet.

“I miss her so much, I want her next to me now,” she said, with her trembling hands leaning over the table.

The noon heat was gone as the room was getting chilly now. Ahmet slowly picked his mother up and sat her on the sofa in the middle of the room, thinking she might catch a cold next to the window. Sitting on the sofa, she waited to catch her breath for a while and then said:

“Well then, son, let’s also visit your grandfather’s grave tomorrow with Rimah, alright? The flowers on his grave must have gone dry out by now, poor thing.”

“Alright, of course mum,” said Ahmet and headed towards the kitchen.

Nowadays, he was saying ok to whatever his mum said as her memory was failing and she could barely remember what she said from one day to the next. Neither of them had had any appetite for days now. The kitchen was soulless, because it had lost its soul, its woman. Ahmet set about preparing the meal, while at the same time thinking of his grandfather and the flowers on his grave. Would they have really gone dry?

I still recall that day, when I gave you the news about my granddaddy’s death at the construction in Libya. Without shedding any tears you went to your room, came back with a pile of money and told me unflappably to bring his body to his own soil where he was born and raised. Then you went in your room and didn’t come out for a while. I have never seen my grandfather, just heard from you what an affable man he was. You always used to tell me that when he died, he wanted to be buried next to his fellow masons, who also happened to be his bosom friends. Did he love his friends that much? You once told me that he was a kind of man who would do anything for his friends. You used to say my grandmother was mad about this side of him, being all too grateful and soft. How painful it should be for a man like him to have to run from his home to another country in order to be able to work. What times we are living in now, in which a loving man like him is caused to flee his country under threat of death. His guilt was to denounce his neighbour preparing for a suicide bomb attack. The police were able to prevent the attack at the last minute, but could not manage to conceal his identity. Then the terrorist organisation went after him. The rest is history...

He put the food near the fireplace. He sneaked a look at his mother leaning his head slightly towards the kitchen door; she was sitting on the couch watching TV. He checked the time as there was little left for Rimah's plane to land. He had been with his mother for days, never leaving her alone. Following the start of her failing memory, doctors said that somebody had to be with her at all times. From that moment, Ahmet never left her. Seeing her losing her memory; seeing her in this helpless and powerless state after all the sacrifices she had made for him. In a single week her eyes became hollow and her face thinner. He wanted Rimah to be next to him, and had asked her to come over to Turkey, interrupting her research in Egypt on water sources. As soon as she found out what had happened, Rimah said she would come on the first plane after sorting her things out. Now she was on her way, and Ahmet needed consolation, to relieve his pain in her warmth.

Ahmet set the table and turned the heat down. Everything was ready now. But he was a bit tired. He sat at the table and looked at the chairs with empty eyes; it had been a long time since he had put three chairs at the table. It reminded him of the first day he introduced Rimah to his mother.

...she was shy, sitting across from me. She wanted to speak but my mum knew neither English nor Arabic. Rimah, you couldn't speak, but my mum was talking to you. She never felt strange. She kept saying "Here, dear, eat from this as well," all the time complimenting and smiling at you. Her eyes were shining with joy, her cheeks all red. I'd never seen her like this and we were both amazed by her. I was translating at the same time, but she seemed like she didn't need that. She loved you so much.

Rimah was about to land. He washed his face, went to the living room and hugged his mother tight. He stayed like this for a

while. Kissed her, smelled her. Then he got her dressed. They were now ready to hit the road. They were going to pick up Rimah from the airport and come back home. It wasn't far from their place. Ahmet helped her into the car seat. The poor woman had a huge smile on her face.

"Where are we going, son? To see your uncle?"

She'd already forgotten all about the airport and Rimah. Ahmet didn't say a thing and started the car.

When they arrived at the airport, they found out that, as usual, Rimah's plane was delayed. They had to wait for an hour. Ahmet went back to the car and started waiting with his mother. She was curious about nothing, only staring out the window. Ahmet was blindly staring at the little flower, thinking of his grandfather.

There were two workers from the municipality. They never spoke. As they shouldered the coffin, my mum poked me hard to have me shoulder it as well. At that moment, I was shocked at what I saw. Lots of beggar women were sitting on pavements, with kids holding water containers, running after visitors coming to the cemetery to pour water on their graves to earn money. Their clothes were all covered in mud from carrying water in the dust. When this guy in front of me gave one kid a cucumber, as he did not have any money, all the other kids besieged him; for a tiny little cucumber. I was so ashamed of myself.

We then strolled inside the cemetery. What a horrible crowd it was. In a huge cemetery with graves lying nose to tail, we were searching for the tiny piece of land reserved for my grandfather. We were searching for the piece of land prepared for the body of a man who had to flee his country. No one gravestone was like another; one dated back a hundred years while others a few years. It

was almost the history of the region that was lying there in that cemetery, resembling the Armageddon of the east. I asked the officer who accompanied us about the anonymous gravestones. They belonged to refugees from Northern Iraq. Following the Iraq-Iran war, when Saddam totally flouted human dignity by taking revenge on the Kurds in Northern Iraq and ruthlessly attacked them with chemical weapons, some of them crossed the border and took refuge in Turkey. Empty marbles with no names, no dates... Their nameless and dateless gravestones were a small picture of the pains suffered in the region. Refugees... They were the leading victims of the war. I could never really understand the pain of being a refugee, the melancholy of leaving home, country and loved ones behind and their never-ending yearning – but even being just a witness was painful enough. After having seen all those nameless gravestones, I remember having thanked God for having my grandfather's stone here with his name on it.

As I was thinking about all of this, my mum never spoke. It was as if she had no power to even wipe her tears. You could tell that she was in a lot of pain. When I saw her tears, mine began rolling down my cheek. We finally managed to locate the piece of land prepared for him. Officers took out the innocent body inside that white casket, slowly lowering him down inside the previously dug grave. I glanced at my mum at that instant, her lips were trembling. Her cheek, almost her whole face, was wet with tears. Not just her lips, her whole body, her heart was shaking like her lips.

Thinking that Rimah must have landed, Ahmet got out of the car telling his mum he'd

be back. Her seatbelt was fastened and the door was closed. There was nothing to worry about as he was going to pick up Rimah and come back in five minutes.

He reached the arrival gate. Just as he had done for years, he was waiting at the international arrivals gate. But he was more impatient than ever this time. There was no one other than Rimah to share his sadness in this situation. Yet, as it was getting late, he was starting to worry about leaving his mum in the car. A little later, he started thinking whether he should go back and wait for Rimah to call. But she must be just about to arrive. Now he was looking more carefully at those entering from the gate, waiting for her to arrive. His concern was growing as he was now starting to think that he made a mistake leaving his mom alone in the car, and just at that instant Rimah appeared at the door.

She smiled innocently when she saw Ahmet, but there was still sorrow. She came to Ahmet with quick steps. After a brief moment of embrace, Ahmet grabbed her baggage and started marching through the exit door. She asked why he was rushing. He quickly explained that his mum was waiting in the car, and that he was worried as she might not understand what was happening. She got worried too.

Fortunately, the car was parked very near. Ahmet relaxed when he saw the car and his mother in the front seat looking out of the window. Rimah got in the front seat as he quickly put the baggage in the boot. Just as he got in with them and they were hugging each other, his mother suddenly turned to Ahmet saying, "Son, who is this girl?"

Death and the Maiden

Emina Japalac. Bosna i Hercegovina

Bio jednom jedan juni. Jedna godina, jedno vrijeme. Nije bilo davno, a ni otrgnuto od sjećanja.

Bio je juni, a juni Gradu prijete velikim valom vrućine i nervozom koju izaziva putnicima u tramvaju. Zaglušujuća buka tramvajskih šina i vječiti strah da nikad neću stići na vrijeme. Ja uvijek kasnim.

Do mene sjeda starac od nekih šezdestak godina koji ne misli da ima toliko.

„Dokle cura?“

Ja ćutim.

„Eh, kako je sad fino, pa malo prošetati, pa malo u kupovinu. Gdje radiš ili ideš u školu?“

Ja ćutim.

„Jesi nekakva, nećeš da pričaš. Pa šta fali?“

„Nisam raspoložena za razgovor, izvinite.“

Ustajem i sjedam na drugo mjesto. Gledam vani, sunce je konačno zapeklo Grad. Ljudi žure na tramvaj, na taksi. U parku na Ch Villi sjede i ljube se zaljubljeni. Djeca idu iz škole u grupicama. Ljetna razdraganost; od te ushićenosti zagrlio bi svako drvo i na krilima prošetao ulicama.

Izlazim na Skenderiji i krećem ka stajalištu za bus prema Koševu. Na stanici ljudi mravi koji svaki dan negdje putuju. Kući, na groblje, na porodilište, na posao, u bolnicu.

Strpljivo čekam busić koji ide za Breku ili Podhrastove. Vjetar i sunce šibaju moje lice dok su mi ruke pretrpane bolesničkim potrebštinama. Toalet papirom, sapunom, vlažnim maramicama, nezaslađenim sokom od cvekle koji mama priprema u kućnoj radinosti. Kažu, sok od cvekle diže iz mrtvih i pomaže teško oboljelim od „gluho bilo“ bolesti. Možda. Nadam se i neću da kažem sebi „možda“.

Ulazim u nadolazeći bus i guram se s ljudima. Svi su nervozni, a neki se i svađaju. Šutim, trpim i čekam kad ću izaći. Ja nemam vremena ni živaca da o tome razmišljam. Zrak je zagušljiv, i čuju se razni mirisi, ponajviše znoja koji zaudara. Pomislim: Kiseli znoj je odlika našeg mentaliteta: tvrdoglavog i nepokornog. Nije to nikakav ponos. To je stid.

Izlazim iz busa i krećem ka bolnici. Znam gdje leži i gdje ću je naći.

Penjem se uza stube dok mirisi bolnice zazivaju u meni mrska sjećanja na predratne posjete ocu na ortopediji. Neće on više osjetiti ove mirise. U zemlji je i znam da je našao svoj mir.

Ulazim u sobu, odjel B 9.

Tamo na krevetu jedva raspoznatljivo lice.

Javi se mršavi kostur bez kose i ijedne dlačice na tijelu. Veselo se javlja čim je ugledala moj lik.

„Jesi to ti Minkić? Dođi teti, teta te poželjela.“

Priđem krevetu. Poljubih je u obraz i pošto nisam mogla da je zagrlim, sjedoh na stolicu.

Obuzeo me užas. Počela sam se tresti i plakati. Boljelo me da vidim to lice koje je i prije bilo mršavo, a sad je propalo i požutjelo, i koje je izgubilo normalni ljudski lik. I taj njen osjećaj veselja što me vidi još je dodatno pojačao moj bol.

„Nemoj plakati, pa to je normalno da gubim kosu. Sad poslije operacije je počela opadati kosa. Uključili su mi Xelode, pa zato. Naša jedna rodica. Ona me obrijala.“

„Teško mi je. Pusti da plačem.“

„Nemoj molim te. Odmah je i meni teško.“

„Kako je prošla operacija?“

„Dobro, dobro. Kad me doktorica, jedna mlada, vodila držala me za ruku i pitala: Muni-
rice, je li se bojiš?

Ja kažem: Ne bojim se, pa i ako umrem, šta mogu? To je Božije davanje.“

„Ne govori, ozdravićeš ti. Jaka si...“

Govorim to, i ne vjerujem samoj sebi. Lažem sebe. Tako žarko želim da se desi neko čudo i otkloni ovu zločudu bolest.

„Ovako se ne mogu namjestiti. Hajde me malo uzdigni da mogu malo da popijem vode.“

Podigla sam njeno tijelo lako kao perce jednom rukom. Ispod debele pidžame su se sijerile kosti.

„E, ovako mi je već bolje. Kako ti je dušo na poslu?“

„Ma dobro je, sve uredi.“

„Šta mama radi? Seka?“

„Seka radi, mama kući, brine se za tebe...“

„Znam, uvijek se brine i zove. Tek sada vidim ko su mi pravi prijatelji. Zovnu me, porazgovaraju, pa makar to što se sjete da me nazovu puno mi znači...“

Veseli smiješak na licu s daškom tuge.

„Šta ako se nikad ne izvučem?...“

„Ne brini se, mi smo uz tebe. Sve će biti dobro...“

„Jesi mi donijela neku knjigu?“

Sjetih se da sam zaboravila. Ali u torbi sam imala roman Očevi i oci od Slobodana Selenića.

„Imam ovu.“

„Šta je to, o čemu se radi? Nemoj mi ništa teško i zamorno...“

„Probaj čitati, možda ti se sviđi...“

Knjigu sam stavila u njenu ladicu i pokupila stvari koje joj ne trebaju: plastične čaše, prljavo rublje, ambalažu od sokova.

„Idem ti sad, da me ne istjeraju sestre...“

„Dobro.“

Poljubila sam je u obraz i na tren osjetila da su joj usne suhe. Uzmem Labello i namažem joj.

„Uzmi mi i neke novine sljedeći put kad dođeš... Mamu puno pozdravi i reci joj da se ne brine.“

„Hoću.“

Izlazim van. Utapam se u asfalt i topim se pod vrelin junskim suncem. Kao da sam jučer u vrelom ljetnjem suncu gledala je kad nas je posjecivala. Razmišljam: o svim razmiricama i neslaganjima između nas dvije. Ona je bila moja druga majka. Razmišljam o svim teškim riječima koje sam u ljetnji izgovorila. Da mogu, vratila bih vrijeme da ona opet bude ista. Da se vrati i veselo kroči u naš dom. Da opet napravi mini val a la Dragana Mirković. Da na njenom licu vidim radost...

* * *

Dani su prolazili. Bilo je i sunca i smijeha, ali nije bilo radosti. Smrt je kao zloćudi aureol kružila iznad čekajući trenutak kada će se odlučiti na zamah sjekirom.

Nada je posljednja umirala.

U kutku male sobice koja je bila i kuhinja i dnevni boravak i sve po potrebi ležalo je njeno tijelo.

Prekrivena, ležala je, žaleći se kako se nikako ne može namjestiti.

„Niko to ne zna ko ne doživi, da ću ovako stalno nešto zanovijetati i tražiti.

Šta mogu kad sam bolesna.

Sad da legnem da se valjam po zemlji ili vrištim niko me ne može pomoći.

Mogu i plakati ali mi niko neće pomoći da se izliječim...“

„Što ne bi pila i cveklu i med? Kažu da je to pomoglo nekom čovjeku iz Hadžića.“

„Sita sam lijekova. Sve sam to već pila, nema koristi. Sve je u Božijim rukama.“

„Vidjeću na internetu šta se sve preporučuje da jedeš i piješ.“

„Pa pogledaj, javi mi. Hajde da malo izađem napolje, hoću da sjedem ispod grozda.“

Pomogla sam joj da ustane.

„Nemoj mi pomagati, daj mi štap pa ću ja sama polako.“

Držeći se za stomak savila se kao upitnik i uzela štap. To više nije bila ona, to je bila sjena od nje.

Prometej kojom je gavran ključao jetru.

„Volim da sjedim napolju i udišem ovaj zrak. Željela bih, kad bih mogla, da prošetam i odem u Zagorsko, da opet vidim planinu i uživam u životu.“

Zakašljala se.

„Dosta mi je. Sad hoću da uđem unutra. Ne mogu više.“

* * *

Savijena na starom ležaju iz šezdeset i neke sa federima koji su škripali na svaki njen pokret nije puštala glasa. Zamrzle su riječi na njenim usnama i bol je bio sve: i dan i noć i svaki trenutak.

Oko nje stare komšinice i rodice i rodice rodica i prijateljice, braća i sestra Hava i mala mačkica Miftar koja se motala oko nogu i tražila meso.

Noć je bila najteža i najduža.

Lica koja čute i ljuljaju se od muke. Tek katkad krene tihi razgovor.

„Ne daj Bože nikom se napatiti...“

„Šuti, bila je do sad dobro, sad je tek loše..“

„Neće izdržati.“

„Ma neće, sama je kost i koža.“

„Pitam se da li me čuje?“

„Ne znam.“

„Loše je, loše.“

Zatvorenih očiju tek na momente je ispuštala jauk.

„Hava, jesi li tu? Ne vidim te, ja te nikako ne vidim...“

Hava je priskočila.

„Tu sam, tu sam.“

„Ja te ne vidim.“

„Opipaj me, ja sam to, ja...“

Hava je uzela njenu ruku i prislonila je uz svoj obraz.

„*Sad mi je lakše. Nek ti Bog da zdravlje...*“

Muk. Lica su plakala i oči brisala maramom, skrivajući od pogleda drugih Isusove muke.

Komadi usirene krvi su otjecali iz organizma koji se grčevitom mukom mukom borio sa životom.

„*Ne ostavljaj me samu, Hava...Ne mogu...Ne mogu...Drži me...*“

Hava ju je stavila na krilo i jako zagrlila i ljubila.

„Ne dam ja tebe sunce moje, bit će ti meni dobro, dobro.“

Čekalo se.

* * *

Otišla je.

Na mukama i neobjašnjivom boli posljednji dan je proživjela pokazujući rukom kad mora u zahod.

Otišla je.

Ni hljeba nije mogla da jede ni vodu da pije.

–Otišla je.

Kažu, „zakasnila s liječenjem“, kažu „takva je bila sudbina“, „tako je moralo biti“, „tako je Bog odredio“, „nije se moglo pomoći“, „spasila se“, „rodila se“.

Mogu svašta da kažu.

Ljudi govore.

A jedan život je nevidljiva ruka nepravde ushanula u najtežim trenucima.

* * *

Opet je sijalo sunce i ona je krenula preko livade po ko zna koji put. Okrenula se, pogledala nas zadnji put, i nastavila dalje.

Death and the Maiden

Emina Japalac. Bosnia and Herzegovina

There was once a June. A year, a time. It was not so long ago, nor has it faded from memory.

It was June, and June threatens the City with a huge heat wave and anxiety among the tram passengers. The deafening noise of tram rails and the constant fear that I will not make it in time. I am always late.

An old man, who is around sixty and does not think that he is sixty, sits next to me.

“Where to, girl?”

I am silent.

“Ah, it must be so nice now, to take a little walk, then go shopping for a bit. Where do you work, or where do you go to school?”

I am silent.

“Aren’t you a sort, you don’t want to talk. What’s the matter?”

“I’m not in the mood for conversation, sorry.”

I get up and sit in another seat. I look outside; the sun has finally started scorching the City. People bustle to catch a tram, or a cab. The lovers are sitting and kissing in the park on Ch Villa. Children are returning home from school in little groups. Summer cheerfulness: the elation that would make you hug every tree and walk the streets on wings.

I get off at Skenderija and head towards the bus station to Koševo. At the station, people travel somewhere every day like ants. They are headed for their homes, cemeteries, maternity wards, jobs, hospitals.

I patiently wait for a little bus that goes to Breka or Podhrastovi. The wind and the sun lash my face while my hands are full of hospital necessities: toilet paper, soap, wet tissues, sugar-free beet juice which is prepared by my mum with all of her domestic diligence. They

say that beet juice raises the dead and helps with those “unheard of” diseases. Maybe. I hope, and I will not say “maybe” to myself.

I enter the arriving bus thronging with people. Everybody is nervous, and some of them are even fighting. I remain silent and wait to get out. I do not have time or nerves to think about it. The air is stale, a variety of scents can be sensed, especially the reeking sweat. I think acidic sweat is a feature of our mentality: stubborn and unrelenting. It is nothing to be proud of. Rather, ashamed.

I step out of the bus and move towards the hospital. I know where I can find her. I climb the stairs while the hospital scents invoke within me dreaded memories of pre-war visits to my father at the orthopaedics department. He will not sense these scents any more. He is in the ground and I know he has found his peace.

I enter the room, department B 9. There on the bed is a hardly recognizable face. A frail skeleton, with no hair on the head or anywhere else on the body, welcomes me. She welcomes me cheerfully the moment she sees me.

“Is that you, Minkić? Come to auntie, auntie missed you...”

I come near the bed. I kiss her and since I cannot hug her I sit on the chair. I am horrified. I start to shake and cry. It hurts me to see the face which was already skinny before and is now drained and yellow, and has lost all normal human shape. Her happiness upon seeing me has additionally increased the pain.

“Don’t cry. It is normal for me to lose hair. After the operation my hair started to fall out. They put me on Xeloda, so that’s why. One of my cousins, she shaved me.”

“It is difficult for me. Let me cry.”

“Don’t, please. You immediately make it difficult for me too.”

“How did the operation go?”

“Well, well. When a doctor, a young one, was taking me and held my hand she asked: ‘Are you afraid, Munirice?’ I said: ‘I’m not afraid, and even if I am afraid to die, what can I do? It is for God to decide.’”

“Don’t talk like that, you will get well. You are strong...”

I say that and I do not believe it myself. I lie to myself. I so fervently wish for a miracle to happen and remove this malicious disease.

“I can’t make myself comfortable like this. Lift me up a bit so that I can drink some water.”

I lift her light as a feather body with one hand. The bones are only hinted at beneath the thick pyjamas.

“Ah, that’s better. How is everything at work, my dear?”

“Oh, it’s alright, everything is fine.”

“What is your mother doing? Your sister?”

“She’s working, mum’s at home, she worries about you...”

“I know, she always worries and calls. Now I see who my real friends are. They call me, talk to me, even the fact that they have remembered to call me means a lot...”

There is a big smile on her face with a whiff of sorrow.

“What if I don’t make it?...”

“Don’t worry, we are all with you. Everything is going to be fine...”

“Did you bring me something to read?”

I realise I have forgotten. But I have a novel, *Fathers and Forefathers* by Slobodan Selenić in my bag.

“I have this book.”

“What is that, what is it about? Don’t give me anything difficult and tiresome...”

“Try to read it, you might like it...”

I put the book in her drawer and pick up things she does not need: plastic glasses, dirty laundry, empty juice packages.

“I’m going now, before the nurses kick me out...”

“Okay.”

I kiss her on the cheek and for a moment feel that her lips are dry. I take Labello out and apply it to her lips.

“Buy me some newspapers next time you come... Say hello to your mum and tell her not to worry.”

“I will.”

I go outside. I drown in the asphalt and melt beneath the hot June sun. It is as if it was only yesterday when I saw her coming to visit us in the hot sun. I think about all the quarrels and disagreements we had. She was a second mother to me. I think about all the harsh words spoken in anger. If I could, I would turn back time so that she could be her old self again. To come back and joyfully step into our house. To have her hair frizzed à la Dragana Mirković again. So that I can see the joy on her face again...

* * *

Days passed by. There was sun and laughter, but there was never joy. Death, like a malicious aureole, was circulating above, waiting for the decisive moment when it would swing the axe. Hope died last.

In the corner of a little room, which was both the kitchen and the living room and everything you need it to be, there lay her body. Covered, she lay complaining about how she could not make herself comfortable.

“No one knows until they live to see it, how they will constantly nag and plead. What can I do, I’m sick... If I now lay and roll on the ground or scream no one can help me. I can also cry but no one can help and cure me...”

“Why don’t you drink beet and honey? They say that helped a man from Hadžići.”

“I’m fed up with medicines. I have already taken them all, they are no use. Everything is in God’s hands.”

“I will look on the internet to see what is recommended for you to eat and drink.”

“Look and tell me. Let me go outside for a little, I want to sit beneath the grape vines.”

I help her get up.

“Don’t help me, give me the cane. I will go slowly by myself.”

Holding her stomach and bent like a question mark, she took the cane. This was no longer her, rather just a shadow of her former self. Prometheus, whose liver was being pecked by a raven.

“I like to sit outside and smell this air. I would like, if I were able, to take a walk and go to Zagorsko, to see the mountain again and enjoy life.”

She coughed.

“I’ve had enough. I want to go inside now. I can’t stand anymore.”

* * *

Bent on the old bed from the sixties with springs that creaked with her every move she was voiceless. Frozen were the words on her lips and pain was everything: day and night and every moment.

Around her are the old neighbours and cousins and cousins of cousins and friends, brothers and sisters, Hava and the little cat Miftar, who circled around legs searching for meat.

The night was hardest and longest.

Faces that are silent and swung by torment. Just an on-and-off silent conversation.

“God forbid this hardship for anyone...”

“Shush, she was fine until now, now she is really bad...”

“She won’t last much longer.”

“Of course she won’t, she’s just skin and bones.”

“I wonder if she can hear me.”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s bad, it’s bad.”

With her eyes closed, from time to time she would let out a little moan.

“Hava, are you there? I can’t see you, I can’t see you at all...”

Hava jumped in.

“I’m here, I’m here.”

“I can’t see you.”

“Touch me, it’s me, me...”

Hava took her hand and put it to her cheek.

“It’s easier for me now. May God give you health...”

Silence. Faces were crying and wiping their eyes with handkerchiefs, hiding the Jesuit suffering from others. Peaces of clotted blood drained away from the organism that fought life with bitter anguish.

“Don’t leave me alone, Hava... I can’t... I can’t... Hold me...”

Hava put her in her lap and kissed and hugged her tightly.

“I won’t let you go, my sunshine, you’ll be fine, just fine.”

We waited.

* * *

She was gone.

In torment and inexplicable pain she lived through the last day pointing when she needed to use the bathroom.

She was gone.

She could not eat bread or drink water.

She was gone.

They say “she was late with the treatment,” “it was destined,” “it had to be,” “it was determined by God,” “nothing could be done to help,” “she was saved,” “she was born.”

They can say whatever they want. *People say*. But one life has been withered away by the unseen hand of injustice in its hardest moments.

* * *

The sun shone again and she headed across the plains for the umpteenth time. She turned around, looked at us for the last time and moved on.

Piosenka Pani Koronkowej

Mateusz Bobowski. Polska

Był taki zwyczaj w mojej rodzinnej wsi, że kobiety zbierały się wieczorami przed jednym z domów, aby wspólnie pleść koronki. U nas bywały najczęściej. Od lata do późnej jesieni widywałem je siedzące przed domem: wszystkie na stołkach albo pieńkach, wszystkie obracały w dłoniach czółenka, szydełka albo drewniane kręgielki. W zimie rozsiadały się w izbie kuchennej. Gdy z bratem wracaliśmy z sanek, siadaliśmy przy kaffowym piecu, żeby wysuszyć się i ogrzać, jedliśmy wtedy mączne placki pieczone na blasze i popijaliśmy gorącym mlekiem. Nasłuchałem się wiele razy, jak rozmawiały, śmiały się, śpiewały – ich palce nie myliły się przy tym wcale, mechanicznie plotły nici przez klocki albo czółenka, z tego wychodziły pikotki i słupki, potem łuczki i kółka, wreszcie frywolitki, ażurowe wstawki i w końcu – koronkowe chusty.

Gdy niebo robiło się czerwone, zajeżdżały do nas jedne sanie za drugimi. Płonęły pochodnie. Było to jeszcze w tych czasach kiedy między wsiami poruszało się za pomocą sań, ponieważ nie można było liczyć na odśnieżoną drogę. Samochody bały się mrozu i ciemności.

Wszystkie te zimowe spotkania upodobały się do siebie, zapętały się, powtarzały, urywały nagle, gdy zasypiałem albo trwały już, gdy się budziłem. Gdy chorowałem sny i majaki zespały się z ze światem wysłuchanym z ich słów i piosenek. Zdarzało się, że wieczór rozpoczął się, gdy wcześniejszy jeszcze się nie skończył, nawarstwiały się jeden wewnątrz drugiego, historie rozpoczynały się i nigdy nie kończyły, gubiły się w głębi, przechodziły w następną, rozpuszczały się w ciepłym mleku albo nieodwracalnie wciągała je pulsująca, magnetyczna czerń za oknami, ciemność nocy na zewnątrz tak pociągająco głęboka, że przymrażała nos do szyby – i tak niebezpiecznie mroczna, że szkło trzaskało i pokrywało się koronkami szronu.

Pewnej szczególnej nocy, gdy już wszystkie siedziały i plotły, a zegar chropowatym uderzeniem wybił pierwszą godzinę pracy, ciotka Krystyna odłożyła koronkę na bok. Wszystkie popatrzyły na nią ze zdziwieniem. Oznajmiła, że jest w ciąży.

Nie była to zwykła wiadomość, ponieważ mąż Krystyny, Antoni, nie był zwykłym chłopem, który jak każdy inny chłop rano obchodził gospodarstwo, zaglądał do stodoły i z zaprzęgniętym koniem jechał na pole. Urodził się tu i wychował, ale – jak mówiła ciotka – nie był synem tej ziemi. Nie widywało się go pracującego na roli, na weselach siedział na uboczu, ludzie się go trochę bali, lokalna gazeta zbandyciła go i wyklęła.

We wsi darzono go jednak szacunkiem – tą szczególną odmianą szacunku, która łączy lęk, respekt i zaciekawienie. Panny koronkowe świergotały wokół ciotki Krystyny wypytując o tego Bandytę, czym się zajmuje, a czy jada chleb jak normalny człowiek, czy dobry aby, czy po bożemu żyje i czy w męskich sprawach biegle. Gdy teraz ciotka oznajmiła, że jest z nim w ciąży, cała izba jakby wstrzymała dech. Zasyzczało powietrze w piecu, zaskowyczał luft, koronki zamarzyły w palcach. Ciemność za oknem przybrała na sile, zgęstniała, zebrała się w sobie i nagle wtargnęła do izby. Rzuciła się do gardeł wszystkim kobietom, rozsiała się po ich myślach i sercach. Oniemiały. Od tej pory Kryśka była dla nich obca. Nosila w sobie przecież coś jakby

cudowne dzieciątko i diabelskie nasienie jednocześnie. Był to pierwszy i ostatni raz kiedy rozmowa zatrzymała palce koronkowych panien.

Pan Antonii szybko stał się obiektem moich licznych śledztw. Była to postać tajemnicza, wiecznie pokryta mchem obmów, szeptów, fałszywych domniemań i fantastycznych legend. Czy jego wygląd coś zdradzał? Mężczyźni w naszej wiosce mieli silne, wielkie dłonie i duże twarze. Ich gruba skóra poprzecinana była głębokimi bruzdami, które zaszyły ciemną ziemią i nigdy nie dawały się domyć. Ich paznokcie były wielkie jak monety, a głosy – niskie, zdolne potrząsać wszystkimi meblami w domu i wypłaszać wszystkie zwierzęta z lasów. Pan Antoni pod tym względem się od nich nie różnił. Jednak jego dłonie nie miały odcisków od łopaty, nie zgniatały kieliszków wódki, nie podszczypywały kobiet, nie dawały mi kuksańców, nie brały na barana – a przecież był moim wujkiem. Chociaż ze wsi wyjeżdżał tylko dwa razy w miesiącu, mówiło się o nim, jakby odjechał i nigdy nie wrócił, jakby umarł albo co najmniej zachorował. Jakby był w więzieniu. Nic z tego nie rozumiałem, więc zacząłem częściej odwiedzać ciotkę. Wykradałem się z kuchni i szukałem po całym domu. Znajdywałem go zawsze w gabinecie z fajką w rękę, nad stertami ksiąg, z piórem w grubych, niezgrabnych palcach.

Innym razem widziałem go, jak siedł w szarym prochowcu i eleganckich butach po zamarniętym polu. Grudy ziemi sterczały wysoko, jakby wyciągały po niego swoje czarne ramiona, by zatrzymać go, przyjąć w siebie i nie wypuścić. On jednak zdawał się unosić ponad tą ziemią, szedł płynnie i powoli, patrzył daleko – w stronę miast.

Jeszcze kiedy indziej widziałem go pod domem, gdy wyniósł z gabinetu notatniki i książki, siadł w cieniu jabłoni i próbował tam pracować. Ledwo zatopił się w myślach, wiatr zaraz się zerwał i unióśł kartki w powietrze, liście zaszeleściły, posypały się jabłka. Pan Antoni zebrał się i wrócił do domu.

Z czasem zacząłem bywać u ciotki Krystyny częściej. Po tym, jak urodził się Antoneczek, ciotka czasem mnie prosiła, żebym go przypilnował, kiedy ona będzie zajmować się koronkami z moją mamą. Zakradałem się do gabinetu pana Antoniego i przeglądałem stopy najróżniejszych książek, szukałem rycin, zdjęć, broni, dowodów zbrodni. Znajdywałem stopy kartek zakrwawionych atramentem, spalone rękopisy, gotową do użycia maszynę do pisania, która zamarała w pół słowa, ale jeszcze była ciepła od świeżo dokonanej kradzieży i przemytu. Rozglądałem się w pośpiechu, by zebrać jak najwięcej informacji i uciec; gdybym został tu przyłapany, to byłby mój koniec. Widziałem – ktoś w tym miejscu cierpiał i rozdawał ciosy, ktoś tutaj krwawił i wzywał pomocy. Widziałem – ktoś w tym miejscu marzył i kochał, ktoś zostawił po sobie ślady, ktoś był tu poddawany magicznym zabiegom, kogoś tu zaczarowano i kogoś tu odczarowano. W powietrzu unosił się jeszcze kwaśny zapach chemicznych odczynników – wystarczający dowód na to, że zaszła tu jakaś synteza, ktoś tu igrał z ogniem, zajmował się rzeczami niebezpiecznymi.

Przyłapał mnie wreszcie. Przez kilka minut próbował mi wytłumaczyć, dlaczego nie powinno się grzebać w cudzych rzeczach, po chwili jednak westchnął, wstał i ruszył w stronę drzwi.

– Chodź, wszystko ci pokażę – powiedział.

Zabrał mnie wtedy do gabinetu i zaczął tłumaczyć. Umiałem już czytać, szybko nauczyłem się pisać. Spędzaliśmy z sobą coraz więcej czasu. Szybko zrozumiałem, jak to możliwe, że bywał w lesie, chociaż do niego nie chodził. A i to dopiero początek. Na moich oczach wybierał się daleko na południe, do afrykańskich kolonii, pędził na mongolskie stopy, odwiedzał

Amerykę, rozmawiał z kozackimi wojakami, tańczył rytualne tańce wokół ognisk na wyżynach Boliwii, zasiadał na widowni Ateńskich teatrów, uciekał przez Nil przed faraonem, a nawet schodził w zaświaty, w ciemne krainy podziemia. Wracał stamtąd pachnący siarką i cały zdyszany. Byłem oczarowany.

Teraz dane mi było przyjrzeć się tym wszystkim tajnym procesom, które zachodziły w jego otoczeniu i zrozumieć, dlaczego ludzie go unikali. Widziałem, jak pan Antonii dotyka po kolei otaczających go rzeczy, widziałem jak nagle bledną, zapadają się w sobie i – chociaż pozostawały pozornie niezmienione – wydawały się jakby niepotrzebne, jakby wyciągnięto z nich sens i zrobiono z niego inny użytek. To stało się ze zdjęciami na ścianach, ze starym zegarem, z globusem. Poczułem wtedy nagle, że jestem tylko dzieckiem, że to dzieciństwo przeminie i nigdy nie wróci, że kiedyś sam będę jak pan Antoni.

I po co ta cała siła? Na co analizy, sublimacje i destylacje? Po co próby odparowania z rzeczy ich sensu, jeżeli czyni się im przez to krzywdę? Nie znałem jeszcze słów „egzystencja” ani „sadyzm”, ale już domyślałem się, że nazywanie rzeczy to akt podstępnej kradzieży i przywłaszczenia. Pan Antoni, jednak był bandytą – i może nie miał siekierki, ani indiańskiego tomahawka, ale skalpować potrafił doskonale. Twarz zachowywał przy tym kamienną, ale zaciętą. Oddychał płynnie, ale świszcząco. Wyglądał spokojnie. Strasznie.

Zrozumienie, po co te całe spiski, napady i szturmowanie zajęło mi więcej czasu. Powoli jednak docierało do mnie, że to, co skradzione, nie było puszczane na wiatr. Istniało królestwo, w którym wszystko, co istniało u nas w chaosie, w soczystym, ale groźnym bezładzie – tam nabierało sensu, układało się w wielkie systemy i układanki. Zagadki dostawały swoje odpowiedzi, a ślepi odyskiwali wzrok. Było to jego królestwo. Pan Antonii kołysał się nad tym swoim państwem, jak pająk na nici i wplatał wszystko w wytkaną z siebie sieć. Rzeczy, ludzie, zdarzenia – były to tylko muchy, które w nią wpadały (z niebytu – w sieć), a potem on podchodził do nich ze swoimi ośmioma oczami i ośmioma odnóżami, owijał w kokon, wysysał do cna. Nagle stanąłem pomiędzy jego królestwem, a tym światem chaosu, w który zamieszkiwałem nieświadomy swojego obywatelstwa. U mnie można było się potknąć nie widząc o co, upaść nie wiedząc gdzie, i czuć ból nie pytając dlaczego.

Drugim krokiem było zrozumienie, że istnieje więcej niż jedno takie królestwo. Że niektórzy ludzie mają tyle siły, żeby zrobić zamach stanu i zasiąść na tronie, a inni służą i słuchają innych władców będąc ich wiernymi obywatelami. Życie polityczne jest bardzo bogate. Toczą się wojny, obywatele migrują, skupiają się w mniejszości, zmieniają obywatelstwa, nabywają nowe.

Wszystko stało dla mnie jasne i tak oczywiste, jak żniwa w sierpniu. Rozumiałem nawet to, co stało się pod jabłonią tego dnia, gdy próbował pod nią dokonywać swoich pajęczych zabiegów.

Otóż usiadł na gruncie zgoła mu nie przyjaznym: gdy tylko rozwijał konceptualne królestwo, świat chaosu do niego wtargnął razem z wiatrem i zburzył, zasypał jabłkami, otumaniał słodkim zapachem jesieni. Rządzić należy w zaciszu ciemnych komnat, z dala od tego, czego można dotknąć palcem, polizać, powąchać. Podobnie z ludźmi: żeby pisać o ludziach, pan Antonii musiał od nich uciekać, chować się przed nimi za barykady książek i manekinów. Inaczej pierwszy lepszy Roman zza rzeki albo jakiś młynarz Kazek – mógł obrócić w niwecz jego słomiane marzanny zwykłym wzięciem w ramiona, soczystym przekleństwem, klepieniem po pysku.

Jak tylko ojciec zobaczył, że za dużo czasu spędzam z panem Antonim, przykręcił mi śrubę i dwa razy więcej w polu pracowałem. Matka też się chyba czegoś bała, bo jednej nocy podsłuchałem, jak kłóci się z ciotką – i kłóciła się o mnie. Bo Antoni – chociaż cieszył się we wsi jako takim szacunkiem – w rodzinie był traktowany jak czarna owca. Była u nas w rodzinie tradycja, że syn przejmuje ziemię ojca i dba o rodzinny dom. Prababka nawet nie pamiętała, żeby któryś z męskich przedstawicieli naszego rodu, odwrócił się plecami do ziemi ojca.

Wtedy jeszcze nie przychodziło mi do głowy, by z ziemi być dumnym albo ziemi się wstydzić. Nie widziałem się w innej roli niż na roli (z rękami po łokcie ubrudzonymi ziemią, skórą spieczoną słońcem i brudem za paznokciami). Zawsze jednak zastanawiał mnie widok pana Antoniego, który przechodził miedzą pomiędzy malinami i ziemniakami zapatrzony albo w dal, albo w nas, którzy oraliliśmy, sialiśmy, zbieraliśmy, wiązaliśmy snopki, widłami przerzucaliśmy siano. Nie wiedziałem, co on robił w tym polu, po co chodzi po naszej ziemi i o czym może myśleć. To jedno nie pasowało mi do jego obrazu. A ziemia wyciągała ku jego nogom swoje czarne skiby, jakby chciała zatrzymać go, uziemić, dać ostatnią szansę. On jednak zawsze sunął kilkanaście centymetrów nad nią.

I w końcu odjechał. Nie zrobiło się bez niego ani smutniej ani puściej. Wieś jakby wzięła drugi oddech i wypełniła się życiem, wyzdrowiała. Zabrał ze sobą co prawda ciotkę Krystynę, ale ona czasami odwiedzała nas z małym Antoneczkiem. Antoneczek lubił przyjeżdżać na wieś, bawił się tu jak w cyrku. Pan Antoni nie przyjechał nigdy.

Poszło o Krystynę. Na weselu w remizie brat Antoniego, Kazimierz, tańczył z nią całą noc. Wszyscy jak zwykle tak mocno się opili, że zataczał się cały budynek na pijanych fundamentach. Krystyna oczywiście kochała męża, jak Bóg przykazał. Była mu wierna, siedziała w domu jak kura na grzędzie, ale czasem tęskno jej było za dawnym życiem, którym nasiąknęła w dzieciństwie. I też o chłopie myślała takim, jakim był jej ojciec, i jakich wzięły sobie jej siostry. Jednak jako prosta kobieta, nie myślała wiele, wiedząc, że nic dobrego z tego nie wyniknie, że najlepszym lekiem na żółć w sercu jest praca w rękach. Gdy się opiała to co innego. Pan Antonii na wesela w ogóle niechętnie przychodził, rzadko tańczył, a jak tańczył to sztywno i krótko. Za to Kazek! Gdy brał ją w obroty szybko zapominała jak się nazywa, gdzie jest ziemia, gdzie piekło a gdzie niebo. Antonii patrzył na to wszystko obojętnie do momentu, w którym Kazek chwycił ją za pośladek i coś tam na ucho powiedział takiego, że cała wieś o tym jeszcze przez dwa pokolenia gadała. Wtedy w Antonim coś pękło, stał się taki, jaki nigdy nie był. Odciągnął swoją babę na bok, rzucił na krzesło i skoczył do Kazka. Oczy płonęły mu wściekle i podobno czerwiejszą miał twarz niżli sam ogień. Wielkimi dłońmi złapał Kazka z mankiety i dyszał mu w twarz, nie mogąc słowa wysyczeć przez zęby. Ostatnie, co powiedział, zapamiętali wszyscy: „Ty... ty... ty... prostaku ty... wieśniaku... Ty chamie!”

Odjechał pan Antoni, a razem z nim odjechała ostatnia szansa, by dociec, odgadnąć, zapytać, dlaczego chodził tą miedzą i o czym wtedy myślał. Trapiło mnie to, ponieważ wszystkie do tychczasowe jego tajemnicze zachowania rozszyfrowałem. To jedno miało pozostać tajemnicą. Z czasem nie dająca spokoju tajemnica zamieniła się w ciekawostkę z przeszłości, ciekawostka z przeszłości w obojętne wspomnienie, w końcu pan Antoni skrył się tak głęboko w mej pamięci, że miałem go zapomnieć na prawie pół wieku.

Teraz jeżdżę do mojej rodzinnej wsi tylko, żeby odwiedzić cmentarz. Nic prócz zmarłych już mnie tam nie trzyma. Raz popełniłem dziecienny błąd i ruszyłem ulicą wzdłuż wsi szukając po

domach, drzewach, twarzach – czy któraś nie spetryfikowała dla mnie jednej chociaż godziny z tamtych czasów.

Pusto. Wszyscy odjechali, sprzedali domy razem z ziemią, teraz pracują w miastach lub Bóg wie gdzie. Nawet powietrze przestało pachnieć końskim łajnem. Poszedłem więc na wzgórze, gdzie kiedyś była nasza ziemia, ale nie było już ani miedzy, ani grządek, ani malin – tylko szeroki łąn dzikiej trawy obrastającej śpiącą glebę. Listopad ją zmroził, tak że nawet nie brudziła wypastowanych butów. Świat wyglądał, jakby nikt w tej trawie nigdy nie łapał świerszczy, jakby nie rosły tu krzaki z malinami, pod którymi chowaliśmy oranżadę, żeby nie wypilo jej słońce.

O czym myślał On, gdy tu stał i patrzył na wieś, której już nie ma? Nigdy się tego nie dowiem, ale mogę teraz zrozumieć słowa, które wypowiedział, gdy był tu po raz ostatni:

„Jestem już martwy dla tej ziemi. Odszedłem i nie mogę wrócić. Choćbym chciał, choćbym ukląkł na niej i modlił się w jej ciepłą glebę, to ona nie wysłucha moich modlitw. Nie ma już rodzinnego domu. Nie ma już ojca ani matki. Nie ma już miejsca, które mogłoby uchronić przez rozczarowaniem.”

Nie wiem, w jakim sensie wypowiadał słowa „ziemia, dom, matka” – w jego królestwie słowa miały zbyt wiele silnych znaczeń. Zastanawiałem się nad tym przechodząc obok miejsca, w którym kiedyś stał mój dom. Teraz rozpościera tu swoje blaszane skrzydła jakiś zakład przetwórczy, nie ma już dziewcząt, które siedzą na progu domu plotąc koronki w symetrycznie doskonałe wzory. One już nie żyją. Koronki produkuje się teraz masowo. Te z dawnych czasów można oglądać w gablotach. Panny koronkowe zmumifikowano, trwają teraz w muzeum folkloru i podrygują jeszcze w rytm pośmiertnych drgawek na festiwalach, na które nie mam odwagi pojechać.

Miss Lace's Song

Mateusz Bobowski. Poland

We had this custom in my home village that women would gather in front of one of the houses, in the evenings, in order to make lace together. Most often they would visit us. Between summer months and late autumn I would see them all sitting in front of the house, on stools or on chopping blocks, and moving the crochets, shuttles, or wooden bobbins in their hands. In winter, they would lounge in our kitchen. Every time my brother and I came back from sledging, we would sit by the tile stove to warm up and dry off. Then we would eat flour cakes baked on top of the stove and wash them down with hot milk. I often listened to them talking, laughing and singing, their fingers never missing a beat. In an automatic manner they wound the threads on bobbins or crockets, creating picots and bars, then circlets and uminami, and then tatting and openwork, and, finally, lace shawls.

When the sky turned red, sleighs would arrive at our place, one after another. Torches would burn. It was all in the times when people used to travel between villages by sledge, because nobody bothered to clear snow from the roads. The cars were afraid of darkness and frost.

All those winter meetings looked increasingly similar, they would loop, repeat; they would end abruptly as I was falling asleep, or they would continue on when I was waking up. The times I was taken ill my dreams and nightmares would combine with the world from the songs and words I'd hear from the women. Sometimes an evening would begin when the previous one had not yet ended. They would accumulate one inside another; the stories would begin and

never finish, lost in their depth, they would transform into new stories; they'd dissolve in the warm milk, or they were sucked for good by the pulsating magnetic blackness behind the windows, the darkness of night outside, so temptingly deep that our noses would stick to the frozen windows, and so dangerously murky that the glass would crack and cover itself with a lace of frost.

Once upon a special night when all the women were already sitting and making lace, and the clock harshly struck the first hour of their work, Aunt Krystyna put her work aside. They looked at her in surprise. She announced she was pregnant.

The news was extraordinary because Krystyna's husband Antoni was not an ordinary peasant and, unlike other villagers, in the morning he didn't inspect his household, check out the barn and ride his horse into the field. He was born and raised here, but as Aunt Krystyna used to say, he was not a son of this land. You would never see him work on the land; at weddings he would sit alone; people were a bit afraid of him; the local newspaper cursed him and branded him a criminal.

And yet, in the village, he was treated with respect – the special type of respect that is a mixture of esteem, fear, and curiosity. The lace girls around Aunt Krystyna would chatter about this Rogue, asking what his job was, did he eat bread like a normal human being, was he good, did he live honestly, and was he a skilful lover? And now, when my Aunt said she was pregnant with his child, the whole room seemed to hold its breath. The air in the stove hissed, the flue whined, the lace froze

in the women's hands. The darkness outside intensified, thickened, gathered its strength, and suddenly forced its way into the kitchen. It jumped for their throats, infested their hearts and minds. They were left speechless, and from that moment Kryśka became a stranger to them. For she seemed to carry a miraculous baby and the devil's spawn at the same time. This was the first and the last time that a conversation stilled the lace ladies' fingers.

Mr Antoni quickly became the object of my numerous investigations. He was a mysterious individual, all covered by the moss of backbiting, whispers, false accusations and fantastic legends. Did his appearance betray anything? The men in our village had big strong hands and broad faces. Their thick skin was furrowed and their deep wrinkles were always soiled, impossible to wash properly. Their fingernails were large like coins, their voices low, capable of shaking all the furniture in the house and chasing all the animals out of the woods. Mr Antoni was just like them in this respect. But his hands were not callous from working with shovels, they did not crush glasses of vodka, they did not pinch women, they did not poke me, they did not give me a piggyback – and yet he was my uncle. Even though he'd leave the village only twice a month, people would talk about him as if he'd gone away forever, like he'd died or at least had been taken ill. Like he'd gone to prison. I never understood it a bit, so I began to visit my Aunt more often. I would sneak out of her kitchen and look all around the house. I would always find him in his study, leaning over a pile of books, holding a pen in his fat clumsy fingers, a pipe in his other hand.

Some other time I saw him walking across a frozen field in his grey raincoat and smart shoes. Lumps of soil protruded high above the ground, as if reaching out their black arms to stop him, to swallow him, and never let him go. He, however, seemed to float

above the soil, walking slowly and smoothly, his eyes fixed towards distant cities.

On yet another occasion, I saw him by his house when he had brought the books and notes from his study, trying to work outdoors. He scarcely began to think when the wind broke lifting the papers. The tree leaves rustled and apples fell. Mr Antoni gathered himself and went back into the house.

In time, I would visit Aunt Krystyna more often. After Antoneczek had been born, my Aunt would sometimes ask me to look after him when she went to make lace with my mother. I would sneak into Mr Antoni's study and browse through the most diverse books; I looked for drawings, photographs, weapons, evidence of a crime. I'd find stacks of ink-spotted pages, burnt manuscripts, a ready-to-be-used typewriter which had broken off in mid-word, but it was still warm, freshly stolen and smuggled. I would look around hastily in order to collect as much information as possible and run away. If I had been caught here, it would be my end. I saw it: somebody suffered and delivered blows to people in this place; somebody bled and called out for help. I saw it: somebody dreamt and loved in this place; somebody left their traces; somebody was subjected to magical procedures; somebody was put under a spell and then the spell was broken. The acidic odour of chemicals was still hanging in the air, sufficient evidence showing that alchemy was practised here, that someone was playing with fire, dealing in the dangerous.

Finally, he caught me. For a couple of minutes he tried to explain to me why one must not rummage in other people's things, but then he let out a gasp, stood up and moved towards the door.

"Come on, I'll show you everything," he said.

He took me to his study and began to explain things. I could already read; I quickly

learnt how to write. We would spend more and more time together. I quickly realised how he was capable of visiting the forest, even though he did not actually go there. And this was just the beginning, anyway. Before my very eyes I witnessed him travel far south to African colonies; rush to the Mongolian Steppe; visit America; talk to Cossack soldiers; perform ritual dances around a fire in the uplands of Bolivia; sit in the auditoriums in Athens; cross the Nile, being pursued by a Pharaoh, and even descend into the beyond, to the dark regions of the underworld. Whenever he returned from there, he smelled like sulphur and he was short of breath. I was enchanted.

Now I was given the opportunity to examine all those secret processes which went on around him, and to understand why people avoided him. I saw Mr Antoni touch the objects that surrounded him, one after another; I saw them grow pale and wane, and even though they appeared unchanged, they seemed redundant, as if their meaning was removed and used differently. This happened to the pictures on the walls, the old clock, the globe. Then I suddenly felt that I was only a child and my childhood would pass and never return; that some day I would be all on my own like Mr Antoni.

What is all the power for then? What use is there for analyses, sublimations, evaporations? Why should one make the efforts to distil things to their very essence if it only harms them? I did not know the words “existence” or “sadism” yet, but I could already guess that lending names to things was an act of insidious theft and usurpation. Mr Antoni, however, was a bandit, and maybe he did not have a hatchet or an Indian tomahawk, but he was great at scalping. He kept an implacable, stone face. He breathed smoothly but with a whistling sound. He looked calm. Terrible.

Understanding the purpose of all those conspiracies, attacks and onslaughts took me

some time. Gradually, however, I realised that what was stolen did not go to waste. A kingdom existed in which all our chaos, our luscious yet menacing welter, made sense, arranging itself in great systems and puzzles. Riddles were being solved and the blind could see again. It was Mr Antoni’s kingdom. He swayed over his realm like a spider on a thread, binding everything in the web he wove. Things, people, events... they were merely flies which fell into the web from an abyss, and then he approached them with his eight eyes and eight legs, wove them into a cocoon and sucked them dry. All of a sudden I stood between his kingdom and this world of chaos I inhabited unaware of my citizenship. In my world you could stumble without knowing over what you tumbled, you could fall without knowing where you fell, and feel pain without asking what its purpose was.

Another step was to see that there are more such kingdoms. That some people were strong enough to prepare a coup d’état and ascend the throne while others obeyed and served other lords as their faithful subjects. Political life is very rich. Wars are fought, citizens migrate, they cluster together in minorities, change citizenships, acquire new ones.

Everything became clear to me and as obvious as the harvest in August. I even understood what happened on the day he tried to carry out his spidery machinations under the apple tree.

Well, he sat down on hostile ground; the very moment he unfolded his conceptual kingdom, the world of chaos invaded it with the wind and ruined it, buried it under the apples, intoxicated it with the sweet smell of autumn. One ought to rule in secluded dark chambers, aloof from what one can touch, lick, smell. It’s similar with regard to people: in order to write about people Mr Antoni had to run away from them first, hide from them behind barricades of books and mannequins.

Otherwise just anybody, some bloke named Roman from the other bank of the river, or a miller called Kazek, could destroy his straw Marzannas by a mere embrace, a juicy swear word, a slap in the face.

As soon as my father saw I was spending too much time with Mr Antoni, he tightened the screws on me and I worked in the field twice as much as I did before. Mother seemed fearful, too, as one night I overheard her argue with my Aunt, about me. For Mr Antoni, regardless of the respect he enjoyed in the village, was treated like a black sheep by my family. We've had this family tradition that the son takes over the father's land and looks after the house. Even my great-grandmother could not recall that a male member of our family had ever turned his back on his father's land.

In those days it never occurred to me that I should be proud or ashamed of the land. I could never see my role as different from that of a farmer (his hands soiled up to the elbows, his skin burned by the sun, his fingernails dirty). But what always made me wonder was the sight of Mr Antoni as he walked down the baulk amid raspberries and potatoes, staring into the distance or at us, busy ploughing, sowing, harvesting, binding sheaves, pitching hay. I did not know what he was doing in the field, why he walked on our ground, and what his thoughts could be. This was the only thing that did not fit his image. And the soil reached for his legs with its black ridges, as if trying to stop him, ground him, give him a last chance. But he would always drift several inches above it.

Finally, he departed. Things did not become more sad or empty without him. Our village, as if taking a second breath and filling itself with life, recovered. Admittedly, he took Aunt Krystyna, but she would visit us with little Antoneczek every once in a while. Antoneczek liked to come to the countryside;

he enjoyed it like a circus. Mr Antoni never paid a visit.

This was due to Krystyna. At a wedding party in the firehouse Antoni's brother Kazimierz danced with her all night. As usual, everybody got so drunk that the entire building teetered on its inebriated foundations. Krystyna loved her husband as God commanded, of course. She was faithful to him; she was always home like a hen on the roosting bar, but sometimes she missed the old life she had become imbued with in her childhood. And she would also think of a man like her father and like the guys her sisters married. A simple woman, however, she did not think a lot, aware that nothing good could come of this, that the best remedy for the bile in your heart is work in your hands. When she got drunk, it was different. Mr Antoni really disliked going to weddings, he hardly ever danced and when he did his dance was stiff and short. Unlike Kazek! Whenever Kazek took her in his arms she forgot who she was, where Heaven, Hell, and Earth were. Antoni was indifferent to it all until Kazek grabbed her behind and whispered in her ear something that was later talked about by two generations of people in our village. At that moment, something broke inside of Antoni; he appeared unlike his usual self. He drew his woman aside, hurled her into a chair, and made a dash for Kazek. His eyes were ablaze with fury and people say his face was redder than fire itself. With his big hands he grabbed Kazek by his shirt sleeves and wheezed to his face, unable to utter a word through his clenched teeth. The last thing he said was remembered by everyone:

"You, you, you boor... You peasant... You churl!"

Mr Antoni left and so did my only chance to investigate, to guess, to ask why he used to walk that baulk and what he thought when he did. It pestered me because I'd fath-

omed all his mysterious proceedings thus far. Only that particular one was to remain a secret. In the course of time, the nagging enigma turned into a curiosity from the past; the curiosity from the past became an insignificant remembrance, and eventually Mr Antoni receded so deep into my memory that I forgot about him for almost half a century.

These days, I only travel to my family village in order to visit the cemetery. There is nothing aside from the dead that would keep me there. I made a childish mistake once and I walked down the village street, searching the houses, the trees, the faces for but a petrified hour from those days.

It's empty there. Everybody's gone, they've sold their homes and land, and they've been working in cities or God only knows where else. Even the air does not smell like horse dung anymore. And so I climbed the hill where our land used to be once, but instead of the baulk, the patches, and the raspberries I found a wide field of wild grass cover the sleeping earth. Frozen by November, it did not even stain my polished shoes. It all seemed as if crickets had never been hunted in this grass, as if the raspberry bushes had never grown, under which we used to hide

our orangeade so that the sun would not drink it.

What did he think about as he was standing here looking at the village that no longer exists? I'll never learn that but, now, I can understand the words he uttered when he was here for the last time:

"I'm already dead to this land. I've departed and there's no returning. Even if I wanted to, even if I knelt down and prayed into this land's warm soil, it won't listen to my prayers. My home is gone. Gone are my father and my mother. Gone is the place that might have saved me from disappointment."

I don't know what he meant by uttering the words: "land", "home", and "mother"; in his kingdom, words had too many strong connotations. I reflected on that as I passed by the place where my house used to be. Today, a processing plant spreads its wings of tin, and the girls who used to sit on the doorstep and make their perfectly symmetrical lace patterns are gone. They are already dead. Lace is mass produced by machines now. The old lace is kept in display cabinets. Mummified, the lace ladies persist in the folklore museum, and they still dance to the rhythm of their post-mortem convulsions at festivals I fear to go to.

עץ הפקאן

יונתן קונדה. ישראל

אי אפשר לומר שבין סבי וביני היה הרבה במשותף. ובכל זאת, שורש זיכרון אחד, משותף, התלפף סביב גופו וסביב גופי, והחזיקנו יחד.

כך, בסתר – גם כאשר כבר לא נותר בינינו שום דבר חוץ משתיקה – שורש זיכרון אחד משותף עוד המשיך וזחל חרישית, מפלס לו דרך מתחת לאדמת חיינו.

הדבר הראשון שזכר סבי מחייו היה איך עמד בבית הכנסת, ומעליו עומד אביו, והוא מחזיק בשולי טליתו. וסבי הרים את ראשו הקטן, והביט מעלה, וראה את שפתיי אביו רועדות, רוחשות בלהט, בלי קול, וכל גופו מתנועע קדימה ואחורה, ומבעד לכתפו ראה, חדר מלא אינספור גברים עומדים כך, עטופים, רועדים, מתנועעים בתפילתם. ואמר סבי לעצמו: זה יער. זה יער. יער מלא עצים מתנועעים בדממה, ורק לחש דק כמו רוח עובר חרישית ביניהם, בין גזע הגוף, בין הידיים הפרוסות כענפים, ושפתיהם רועדות כעלים.

וכך, גם הזיכרון הראשון שלי מחיי: אני עומד בבית הכנסת, לצד סבי, וסבי מתנועע לאט, קדימה ואחורה, ושפתיי רוחשות חרישית, והוא שולח אחורה את ידו הגדולה, להחזיק בידי, ואני מרים את ראשי ורואה חדר מלא, אינספור גברים, מתנועעים בשתיקה ורק שפתיהם רוחשות עם כנפי בגדיהם.

והזיכרון נטוע בי, ורועד עדיין, כמו עץ, ברוח הפרצים של חסרונו.

סבי הביט באביו מתפלל וראה עץ מתנועע ביער. ומדי פעם, כאשר היינו יושבים ליד שולחן המטבח והיה מספר לי את זיכרונותיו ומגיע לזיכרון זה, היה אומר, "שם – לא כמו כאן. שם היו האנשים נושאים עצים בתוכם. שם הכל היה יערות, יערות עבים וחשוכים. אבל לא שלנו. ההרים לא היו שלנו, והשמיים לא היו שלנו, והיערות לא היו שלנו. אז כל אחד נטע עץ בתוכו. וכשהתפללנו רקדנו כמו יער."

לא הבנתי מה רוצה סבי. למה הוא מתכוון. הייתי מהנהן, ומחייך, מחכה שהוא יסיים את סיפוריו, ואז רץ החוצה לחצר הבית. לא היה דבר מלבד חול, ורק עץ פקאן אחד גדול עמד לבדו באמצע החצר. שם הייתי משחק. והעץ היה מעמיד אתי פנים: פעם היה ספינת פיראטים עצומה. פעם מפלצת ירוקה. ולעיתים, היה קורה עבור שער כדורגל מאולתר. וכשהמשחק נגמר, הייתי אוסף את כל האגוזים שנפלו מהעץ, ומביאם חזרה אל הבית. ושם היינו יושבים, סבי ואני, על המרפסת, ומפצחים אותם עם פטישים.

"והרכבות היו יוצאות מוקדם כל בוקר, מערבה, אל עבר עיר המחוז, והרכבות עמוסות אנשים שיוצאים לעבודה, ואני הייתי עומד בחצר הבית, עם שחר, ליד הפסים, ומביט בקרונות חולפים ומבעד לכל החלונות אינספור גברים עומדים בטליתותיהם, פונים מזרחה, מתנועעים בתוך הקרונות בתפילתם, והרכבת נוסעת ביעף, והם בתוכה, ברחש גדול מתנועעים כהנה וכהנה – יער שלם, בתוך הרכבת." ואז תמיד היה עוצר סבי, ועוצם את עיניו. "ואז הייתה נעלמת הרכבת אל תוך היערות הגדולים שהקיפו את הכפר, והכפר לא שלנו, והיערות לא שלנו."

לפעמים, לקראת ערב, בקיץ, סבי היה יורד מהבית, בתחתונים, אל החצר, ועומד מתחת לעץ, ומביט בי קוטף אגוזים. סבי עומד מתחת לעץ, וקורא לי לבוא, לעלות הביתה, כי מאוחר. ואני מרים עיני ומביט בסבי בעד הצלליות הארוכות והחושך הדקיק הנפרש מתחת לעץ. ומהבית הייתי מביט חזרה בעץ, ורואה איך הוא משפיל את מבטו לאדמה.

"ואז יום אחד רכבת כוז, בדיוק כוז, לקחה אותנו, ולא הפסיקה לנסוע, דרך לילה חושך מאד, נשאה אותנו הרכבת, כל הדרך לכאן, לבית הזה."

"אבל אין פה שום מסילה..." , אמרתי פעם.

"נכון. כי זאת לא הייתה בדיוק רכבת כזו. היא הייתה ארוכה יותר וחשוכה יותר... לא היו בה חלונות, ולא היו בה כסאות. ולא היו מסילות. הגענו, לא משנה איך. וזה מה שחשוב."

"אז איפה היא היום?"

"היא כאן, ממש כאן, בחצר. כשהביאה אותנו הרכבת לכאן כבר לא היה צורך בה... אז לקחתי אותה ושלתתי אותה באדמה. והיא נהייתה לעץ של פקאנים בחצר"

האמנתי לסבי, והייתי שוכב מתחת לעץ על הגב, ומדמיין איך הענפים השחורים הם מסילות ארוכות שרצות לכל אורך השמיים.

ומדי בוקר, עם שחר, הייתי שומע את סבי מטפס ועולה אט אט במדרגות הבית, להתפלל שחרית. ובחצר הייתה מטפסת ועולה רוח חרישית. וחלון חדרו נשקף אל החצר. והוא היה פותח את חלון החדר לרווחה, והעץ ריצד בין התריסים. והבטתי בעץ רועד ברוח, וחשבתי שהעץ גם מתפלל. והבטתי בסבי בתפילתו, והתפילין כרוכים סביב ידו, והייתי חושב, כמו מסילות רכבת עוטפות את סבי. וסבי, קד קידה עמוקה, מזרחה, וכל גופו כפוף בשתיקתו, כענף כורע תחת משקל פרי.

"שם – היערות לא היו שלנו. אבל כאן, לא היו שום יערות. רק בניינים. יערות של בניינים. יערות של בטון. ואמרו, האדמה שלנו, והשמיים שלנו. אבל אין יערות. רק בניינים, ומתחת לבניינים, חול."

ולא אמרתי דבר. אבל ידעתי – פה כבר אף אחד לא נושא בתוכו עץ. סבי, את העץ שהיה בתוכו, הוא שתל באדמה. וכשמת שוב לא רעדו שפתיו כמו עלים בתפילה. ורק העץ התנועע לאיטו בעד התריסים של החלון. החזקתי בידו. הוא שכב במיטה, ואני החזקתי בידו, כמו שהוא החזיק אז בידו. ובחוף מחשיך, ואנחנו יושבים בתוך הבית, ושותקים.

כשעיניו נעצמו חשבתי – איך דומות הן לאגוזים, שני אגוזים שצנחו מענף גופו. עיניו העצמות היו שני אגוזים, ועכשיו, ידעתי, אין שום פטישים לפצחם. והעץ מרצד בחלון, מלא אגוזים כמו אינספור עיניים עצומות. ואמרתי: העץ עכשיו, כמו סבי, חולם.

כאן, לא כמו שם, אנשים כבר אינם נושאים בתוכם עץ. יש בית. ויש חצר. ובחצר יש אדמה. ואנשים שתלו את העצים שלהם באדמה. הם חשבו – הבית הזה שלנו. וגם האדמה. והם הוציאו את העץ שהיה בתוכם, ושתלו אותו כאן, באדמה.

על תיבת הדואר עוד כתוב שמו. על דלת הבית הסגורה עוד כתוב שמו. על המצבה כתוב שמו. ורק על העץ לא כתוב דבר.

וכשמת סבי נעזב הבית. יבואו, לבטח, להוריד את הבית. יבואו לכרות את העץ. ותשאר שוב רק אדמה. לא לאף אחד. יבנו פה בית אחר, אולי יחפרו בריכת שחייה. יאמרו, פעם היה פה בית, ופעם, היה פה עץ. ויצחקו, ויקפצו אל תוך הבריכה. וכעת, רק הזיכרון חולף כמו צל נץ מעל החצר הקטנה, בה פעם היה בית, וחול, ועץ פקאן אחד גדול, רועד ברוח כבתפילה.

אני עוצם את עיניי. סבי, זיכרון, פתאום, חרישית, רועד כמו עץ, בקירבי.

The Pecan Tree

Yonatan Kunda. Israel

It's impossible to say that there was a lot in common between my grandfather and me. But despite this, the root of one common memory is wrapped around his body and around mine, and we held it together.

Thus, in secret, even when nothing was left between us except silence, the root of one common memory still continued and crawled softly, clearing itself a path from under the earth of our lives.

The first thing that my grandfather remembered in his life was how he stood in the synagogue, his father standing above him, and he would hold on to the edges of his tallit. My grandfather lifted up his tiny head, looked up, and saw his father's lips trembling, whispering with passion, noiselessly, and his whole body swaying, back and forth, and from over his shoulder he saw a room full of infinite men standing thus: enwrapped, shaking, swaying in their prayers. And my grandfather said to himself: it's a forest. It's a forest. A forest full of trees swaying in absolute silence. And only a thin whisper like the rustle of wind passing softly between them, between the trunk of the body, between the hands outspread like branches, and their lips shaking like leaves.

And so too the first memory of my life: I am standing in the synagogue, next to my grandfather and he is swaying slowly, back and forth, his lips whispering softly, and he sends back his big hand, to hold my hand, and I lift up my head and see a full room, infinite men, swaying in silence and only their lips rustling with the corners of their clothing. And the memory is planted in me, and still trembles, like a tree, in the bursting wind of his absence.

My grandfather looked at his father praying and saw a tree swaying in the forest. And from time to time, when we were sitting by the kitchen table and he would tell me his memories, and would come to this memory, he would say:

“There, it's not like here. There, people held trees inside of themselves. There, everything was forests, thick and tangled forests. But not ours. The mountains were not ours, the sky was not ours, the forests were not ours. Then, everyone planted a tree inside himself. And when we prayed, we danced like a forest.”

I didn't understand what my grandfather wanted. What he meant. I would nod, smile, wait for him to finish his stories, and then run outside to the courtyard of the house. There was nothing but sand, and only one big pecan tree stood by itself in the middle of the courtyard. I would play there. The tree would pretend with me: once it would be a giant pirate galleon, another time a green monster and sometimes it was the post of an improvised soccer goal. When the game was over, I would gather all of the nuts that fell from the tree and bring them back into the house. There we would sit, my grandfather and I, on the porch, cracking them with hammers.

“And the trains would leave early each morning, westward, towards the district city, the trains packed with people leaving for work, and I would stand in the courtyard of the house, at dawn, besides the tracks, and watch the train carriages passing and from behind all of the windows infinite men standing in their tallitot, facing eastwards, swaying in their prayers, and the train travelling in flight,

and they inside it, a great rustling, swaying this way and that – a great forest, inside the train.” And then my grandfather would always stop, and close his eyes. “And then the train would disappear into the great forests that surrounded the village, and the village was not ours, and the forests were not ours.”

Sometimes, towards evening, in the summer, my grandfather would descend from the house, in underwear, to the courtyard, and stand under the tree to watch me picking nuts. My grandfather stands under the tree, and calls me to come, to ascend to the house, because it’s late. I lift my eyes and look at my grandfather beyond the long shadows and the paper-thin darkness spreading from under the tree. From the house I would look back on the tree and see how it lowers its glance to the ground.

“And then one day, a train like that, just like that, took us and didn’t stop travelling, through a very dark night, the train carried us all the way here, to this house.”

“But there’s no track here...” I once said.

“True, because it wasn’t exactly a train like that. It was longer and darker... there weren’t any windows in it, and there weren’t any chairs. And there were no tracks. We arrived, it doesn’t matter how. And that’s what’s important.”

“So where is it today?”

“It’s here, really here, in the courtyard. When the train brought us here, there was no longer any need for it... so I took it and planted it in the ground. And it became this pecan tree in the courtyard.”

I believed my grandfather. I would lie under the tree on my back, and imagine how the black branches were long tracks that run the length of the sky. And each morning, at dawn, I would hear my grandfather climb and slowly, slowly ascend the stairs of the house to pray the morning service. And in the courtyard a silent wind would climb and

ascend. And the window of his room looked out onto the courtyard. And he would open the window of the room widely, and the tree danced between the blinds. And I watched the tree shake in the wind, and I thought that the tree was also praying. And I looked at my grandfather in his prayer, and his tefillin wrapped around his arm, and I would think, like train tracks, they enwrap my grandfather. And my grandfather bowed a deep bow, eastward, and his whole body was bent in his silence, like a branch bending under the weight of fruit.

“There, the forests were not ours. But here, there were no forests. Only buildings. Forests of buildings. Forests of concrete. And they said the land is ours, and the sky is ours. But there are no forests. Only buildings, and under the buildings, sand.”

I didn’t say a word. But I knew that here no one carries a tree within anymore. My grandfather planted the tree that was inside him in the ground. And when he died his lips never shook again like leaves in prayer. Only the tree swayed slowly beyond the window blinds. I held his hand. He lay on the bed, and I held his hand, like he held my hand then. And outside it became dark, and we were sitting inside the house, being silent.

When his eyes closed, I thought how similar they are to nuts, two nuts which dropped from the branch of his body. His closed eyes were two nuts, and now, I knew, there were no hammers to crack them. And the tree danced in the window, full of nuts like infinite closed eyes. And I said: the tree, like my grandfather, is now dreaming.

Here, unlike there, people don’t carry a tree inside them anymore. There is a house and there is a courtyard. And in the courtyard there is earth. And people planted their trees in the earth. This house is ours, they thought. And also this land. They pulled out the tree that was inside of them and planted it here, in the earth.

His name is still written on the mailbox. On the closed door of his house his name is still written. On the gravestone his name is written. And only on the tree nothing is written.

And when my grandfather died, the house was abandoned. They will surely come to tear down the house. They will come to cut the tree. And again only land will be left. Not to anyone. They will build another house here; maybe they will dig a swimming pool.

They will say, once there was a house here, and once there was a tree. And they will laugh, and they will jump into the pool. And now, only the memory passes like the shadow of a hawk above the small courtyard; within it there once was a house, and sand, and a big pecan tree, shaking in the wind like in prayer.

I close my eyes. My grandfather, a memory, suddenly, silently, shakes like a tree, inside me.

Le soulèvement du vieil homme

Majed Bamya. Palestine

Il marche d'un pas lent et décidé, en phase avec le flot de sa voix. Il regarde l'horizon, comme s'il était face à la mer et non face à ces ruelles sales, trop étroites pour y construire un destin. Il arpente les rues, et elles se transforment sous l'effet de ses pas. Elles révèlent leur caractère ; assument leur histoire ; nous rappellent des souvenirs intimes et des joies collectives ; ressuscitent nos jeux d'enfants et nos rires qui furent leurs voix pendant longtemps. Il disparaît, et la magie s'éteint. Le présent ruine le passé, et divorce de l'avenir. Plus de rire ici. Ni intimité, ni partage. Solitude. Rien d'autre qu'une multitude de solitudes, se côtoyant tous les jours.

Nul ne sait si le lieu l'a précédé, ou s'il devança le lieu. Il aime dire : « Je suis plus vieux que ces pierres et ces pavés. Vous pouvez leur demander de raconter votre enfance, mais seul moi peut raconter leur naissance ».

Le vieil homme descend la rue à la rencontre de jeunes qui font désormais la loi dans nos quartiers. Ils définissent le permis et l'interdit, le droit de passage et l'étendue de la liberté de parole. Que va-t-il leur dire ? Je ne peux m'empêcher de le suivre. Il va droit vers eux et une inquiétude s'empare de moi à chaque pas qui le rapproche de gamins, devenus tyrans au nom de la liberté.

Il se pose devant eux. Ces derniers discutent vivement, probablement pour définir les règles du jour. Il se tient là, sans prononcer un mot, sans faire un geste, les bras derrière le dos. Il attend. Il ne les regarde pas, il fixe toujours cet horizon qui lui appartient et qui nous est invisible.

Au bout d'un (long) moment, ils s'aperçoivent de sa présence, se retournent et commencent à le mitrailler du regard.

– Que veux-tu vieil homme ?

– Je viens m'enquérir des règles du jour, je ne voudrais point les violer en raison de mon ignorance, dit-il d'un ton sarcastique.

– M'enquérir ?? Tu te fous de nous le vieux ?

– Je ne te parais vieux que parce que tu es jeune. Mais tu es déjà bien âgé pour utiliser un tel vocabulaire.

– Vise moi ça, il s'est pris pour ma mère !

– Ce serait tout à fait inapproprié, je ne me le permettrais pas. Mais je suis venu vous faire part de mes réserves les plus fortes quant à votre attitude. Ce quartier appartient à tous ses habitants, qui ne vous ont ni choisis, ni mandatés, ni élus. De quel droit vous prévaliez-vous pour régenter ainsi nos vies ? Choisir qui a le droit de passer, qui a le droit de parler et qui est condamné au silence, qui a le droit de vivre et qui doit mourir.

– Si tu continues comme ça tu vas rapidement rejoindre la deuxième catégorie ! Hahaha !

Il leur laisse le temps de rire. Ses rides me semblent tristes, mais ses traits n'ont point changé. Il attend.

– Tu vas nous laisser tranquille, dit l'un de la bande d'un ton agacé.

– Dès que vous aurez décidé de nous laisser tranquilles !

Au fur et à mesure de la conversation, un attroupement se constitue. J'ai peur que la présence d'un tel public encourage les nouveaux chefs autoproclamés à se montrer impitoyables, en faisant du vieux un exemple pour tous ceux qui oseraient, à l'avenir, contester leur hégémonie.

– Ce que nous faisons, c'est pour le bien de la cité. On n'est pas là pour jouer, on est là parce que c'est notre devoir, et les règles que nous édictons sont justes. Laquelle contestes-tu ?

– La justesse d'une règle imposée par des moyens injustes et des forces illégitimes, ne rend ni les moyens, ni les forces acceptables. Et puis qui es-tu pour décider que telle règle est juste et que telle autre ne l'est pas ?

– Je suis le fils de ce quartier.

– Moi j'ai construit ce quartier et je ne prétends pas avoir plus de droits que toi sur son avenir, mais je te conteste le droit d'en avoir plus que moi.

– Tu voudrais qu'on les laisse détruire le quartier, toucher son honneur, laisser les dépravés faire la loi.

– Je voudrais que tu fasses ta part, en toute humilité. L'arrogance est la mère des défauts.

Un jeune homme apparu il y a quelques instants écoute la conversation avec attention. Il échange un regard complice avec le vieil homme.

– Tu étais où vieil homme quand nous faisons la révolution ? Assis chez toi entraîné de nous regarder à la télé. Et maintenant tu viens nous donner des leçons ! Tenta un des leaders du groupe.

Le visage du vieil homme s'assombrit. La mer dans ses yeux devient vagues. Et le sel des souvenirs vient brûler ses paupières.

– Ca suffit ! Le nouveau venu dit cela d'un ton sec, sans avoir à hausser la voix.

– Qui es-tu ? Rétorqua un des jeunes.

– Tu ne me reconnais déjà plus... Il enleva sa casquette et on découvrit celui qui, il n'y a pas si longtemps était à la tête des mobilisations populaires. Il avait ensuite disparu.

Un brouhaha s'empara de la foule.

– Toi ! Tu viens défendre ce vieil homme alors que tu sais mieux que quiconque dans quel état était ce quartier avant.

– Oui, je le sais. Et je n'appréciais pas cet état plus que toi. Mais eux aussi avaient commencé comme toi, à parler en notre nom, à décider à notre place.

– Tu veux qu'on laisse la ville au chaos ?

– Je veux que tu la rende à ses habitants.

Le vieil homme reprit la parole.

– Ce qui détruit la cité c'est l'affrontement de certitudes contradictoires, toutes parées de vérités absolues. L'Homme est par essence faillible, il n'est donc pas exempt d'erreurs.

– Alors on fait quoi, on ne fait rien pour ne pas se tromper, vieil homme ? Je préfère prendre le risque de défendre mes convictions que de choisir le silence.

– Qui a parlé de silence ? Défends ta vérité, et laisse-moi défendre la mienne. La démocratie, c'est ça.

– Une majorité des habitants nous soutient. La démocratie c'est ça !

– Comment as-tu mesuré ce soutien, et qui peut vérifier ton affirmation, pour le moins péremptoire ? Tu t'es érigé seul en porte-parole de la majorité. Et même si la majorité te soutenait, la minorité n'aurait-elle plus droit à la parole ? Les certitudes d'aujourd'hui peuvent deve-

nir les erreurs d’hier. Le cœur de la démocratie est le doute. Le doute qui permet au pluralisme de vivre, le doute qui permet à l’alternance de se faire, le doute qui rejette tout pouvoir absolu, le doute qui permet de dire que la liberté doit être confrontée à la liberté, que la parole doit être confrontée à la parole, pour que nos idées avancent et s’améliorent. La démocratie est la reconnaissance que nous sommes en quête permanente d’une vérité plus parfaite. C’est en déclarant que la vérité est une, et qu’on l’a trouvée, qu’on pose les bases d’une dictature.

Les jeunes tyrans se moquaient de lui, l’arrogance de l’âge diraient certains. Je crois surtout qu’ils avaient été si longtemps méprisés qu’ils ne savaient pas ce que voulait dire respecter autrui.

Le vieil homme n’en démord pas.

– Je veux que vous nous rendiez notre rue !

– Viens la prendre.

– C’est ce que je suis venu faire, je vous donne une heure.

Il lance un nouveau regard à son ancien disciple dont il avait été si fier lors des mobilisations, et encore plus fier aujourd’hui. Celui qu’il avait hébergé chez lui pendant la période où il était recherché partout. Il l’avait payé très cher. Le jeune homme lui avait redonné espoir, ou, pour être plus précis, lui avait réappris à douter de la fatalité de son désespoir. Le vieux avait tenté de l’aider à trouver un chemin, en lui conseillant d’emprunter les sentiers nus de pas. Il l’avait encouragé à prendre toute sa part dans les révoltes, mais l’avait prévenu : la révolution barre la route à un passé injuste, mais elle n’ouvre la voie à un avenir juste que si ceux qui la mènent demeurent fidèles aux principes pour lesquels ils se sont soulevés.

Le vieil homme rebrousse chemin, tandis que le jeune leader disparaît aussi vite qu’il n’est apparu. Le public se demande comment allait se terminer cette pièce et surtout, si elle allait réussir à défier une fin extrêmement prévisible. Le sage arpente la rue dans le sens inverse. La mer change de direction pour rejoindre son regard. On se retrouve face à face, il me reconnaît, je crois. À ses yeux, chaque être est important, chaque regard est différent. Sa mémoire ne s’encombre pas de détail mais d’impressions humaines, dont la trace sur l’âme est bien plus prégnante. Je l’arrête.

– Que comptez-vous faire. Ils peuvent devenir violents, vous savez. Rien ne vous oblige à défendre ces gens qui restent passifs.

Il sourit.

– Tu as raison. De toute façon, au vu de mon physique, il y a fort à parier qu’en cas de bagarre, je serai défait. Le vieux ne gagne que dans ce film de kung-fu.

– Vous voulez dire *Karaté kid*, il avait réussi à me faire rire. Mais alors que comptez-vous faire ?

– Je n’ai pas l’intention de me battre, mais j’ai déjà vaincu la peur, regarde derrière moi, cette foule qui a vu ce vieil homme leur parler sans trembler, s’est transformée de public passif en acteur. Je ne peux leur offrir la liberté, je leur rappelle simplement qu’ils peuvent et doivent l’arracher.

La foule attroupée hausse le ton contre les nouveaux tyrans, les mères sont venues chercher les rebelles par les oreilles, rappelés en un instant à leur enfance. Je me suis retournée, le sage s’était éloigné, et de dos, je devine ses rides souriantes.

The Old Man's Revolt

Majed Bamyā. Palestine

He walks at a slow determined pace, in line with the flow of his voice. He looks at the horizon as if he were in front of the sea rather than these dirty alleys, too narrow to build a destiny. He walks up and down the streets, and they are transformed by the effect of his steps. They reveal their character; they assume their history; they remind us of private memories and collective joys; they revive our children's games and our laughter which were their voices for so long. He disappears, and the magic vanishes. The present ruins the past, and distances itself from the future. No more laughter here. No intimacy or sharing. Solitude. Nothing but a multitude of solitudes, meeting every day.

Nobody knows if the place has preceded him, or if he anticipated the place. He likes saying: "I am older than these blocks and these cobblestones. You can ask them to tell you about your childhood, but only I can explain their birth."

The old man goes down the street in search of the young people who now make the law in our neighbourhoods. They define permission and prohibition, the right to pass and the extent of freedom of speech. What will he tell them? I cannot help following him. He moves straight to them and a concern consumes me with every step he takes towards the boys, who have become tyrants in the name of freedom.

He stands before them. They argue energetically, probably to define the rules of the day. He stands there, without uttering a word, without making a gesture, with his arms behind his back. He is waiting. He does not look at them, he always stares at this horizon which belongs to him and is invisible to us.

After a (long) moment, they become aware of his presence, turn and begin to pierce him with their eyes.

"What do you want, old man?"

"I've come to enquire about the rules of the day, I wouldn't want to violate them out of ignorance," he says sarcastically.

"Enquire?? Are you mocking us, old man?"

"I only seem old to you because you're young. But you're already quite old to use this language."

"Amazing, he thinks he's my mother!"

"That would be quite inappropriate, I would never presume so much. But I've come to tell you about my great reservations regarding your attitude. This neighbourhood belongs to all its residents, who haven't chosen, appointed or elected you. What right do you have to govern our lives like this? To choose who has the right to pass, who has the right to speak, who is bound to silence, who has the right to live and who to die."

"If you go on like this, you'll soon be part of the last category. Ha ha ha!"

He allows them time to laugh. His wrinkles look sad to me, but his features have not changed at all. He's waiting.

"You will leave us alone," says one of the gang in an irritated tone.

"Once you have decided to leave us in peace!"

As they talk, a crowd gathers. I'm afraid the presence of this audience encourages the new self-proclaimed leaders to appear merciless, making an example of the old man for all those who would dare, in the future, to question their hegemony.

“What we do is for the good of the city. We are not here to play, we are here because it’s our duty, and the rules we decree are fair. Which one do you question?”

“The fairness of a rule imposed through unfair means and illegitimate forces does not make the means or the force acceptable. What is more, who are you to decide which rule is fair and which one is not?”

“I was born in this neighbourhood.”

“I built this neighbourhood and I don’t claim to have any more rights than you regarding its future, but I question your right to have more than me.”

“You’d like them to destroy the neighbourhood, undermine its honour, let the deprived make the law.”

“I would like you to play your part in all humility. Arrogance only leads to mistakes.”

A young man who had turned up some time ago is carefully listening to what they’re saying. He exchanges a look of complicity with the old man.

“Where were you, old man, when we were making the revolution? Sitting at home watching us on TV. And now you’ve come to lecture us!” one of the leaders of the group taunted him.

The old man’s face darkened. The sea in his eyes became waves. And the salt of memories came to burn his eyelids.

“That’s enough!” the new arrival said drily, without raising his voice.

“Who are you?” one of the men asked.

“You don’t recognise me anymore...” he took off his cap and they realised that, not long ago, he had been at the head of the people’s mobilisations. He had later vanished.

A hubbub took hold of the crowd.

“You! You’ve come to defend this old man when you know better than anyone what this neighbourhood was like in the past.”

“Yes, I know. And I didn’t like it any more than you. But they also began like you, speaking in our name, deciding for us.”

“Do you want us to leave the town in chaos?”

“I want you to give it back to its residents.”

The old man continued talking.

“What is destroying the town is the collision of contradictory certainties, all adorned with absolute truths. Man is in essence fallible, he is therefore not free of errors.”

“So, what should we do to avoid making mistakes, old man? Nothing? I’d rather take the risk of standing up for my convictions than choosing silence.”

“Who has spoken of silence? Defend your truth, and let me defend mine. This is democracy.”

“Most residents support us. This is democracy!”

“How have you measured this support, and who can verify your statement, which to say the least is preemptory? You have stood alone as the spokesman for the majority. And even if the majority supports you, don’t the minority have the right to speak? Today’s certainties can become the errors of the past. The core of democracy is doubt. Doubt that enables pluralism to live, doubt that enables changes of political power between the parties to take place, doubt that rejects any absolute power, doubt that enables us to say that freedom must confront freedom, that words must confront words, so that our ideas advance and improve. Democracy is the acknowledgement that we are in a permanent search for a more perfect truth. It is by stating that there is one truth that the foundations of a dictatorship are laid.”

The young tyrants made fun of him. Some would call it the arrogance of age. I firmly believe that they had been despised for so long that they didn’t know how to respect others.

The old man stands by his opinion.

“I want you to give us back our street!”

“Come and take it.”

“That’s why I’m here. I’ll give you one hour.”

He glances again at his old disciple who he had been so proud of at the time of the mobilisations, and is even prouder today. The one who he had sheltered at home when he had been looked for everywhere. He had paid very dearly. The young man had given him back hope or, to be more precise, had taught him to doubt the course of his despair. The old man had tried to help him find a way, advising him to take new paths. He had encouraged him to become fully involved in the revolts, but he had warned him: revolution blocks the road to an unfair past but only opens the way to a just future if those who lead it remain loyal to the principles of the revolt.

The old man turns back while the young leader disappears as quickly as he had appeared. The audience wonders how this piece will end and, above all, if it will avoid an extremely predictable end. The wise man walks down the street in the opposite direction. The sea changes direction to meet his gaze. We meet face to face, he recognises me, I think. For him, each being is important, each outlook is different. His memory is not

filled with details but rather with human impressions, whose imprint on the soul is much more meaningful. I stop him.

“What will you do? They can be violent, you know. Nothing obliges you to defend people who remain passive.”

He smiles.

“You’re right. In any case, given my physical condition, it’s quite clear that if it comes to fighting, I’d be defeated. The old man only wins in that Kung-Fu film.”

“You mean, *Karate Kid*.” He had managed to make me laugh. “But what do you plan to do?”

“I have no intention of fighting, but I have already defeated fear, look behind you, the crowd who has seen this old man speaking to them without trembling, has passed from passive audience to actor. I can’t offer freedom, I simply remind them that they can and must strive for it.”

The gathered crowd raises the tone against the new tyrants, the mothers have come to take the rebels by the ears, remembering for a moment their childhood. I have turned back; the wise man has gone away, and, looking at his back, I can imagine his smiling wrinkles.

Η Αλφαβητοχώρα

Γιώργος Αμπατζίδης. Ελλάδα

Η μέρα έμοιαζε συνηθισμένη στην Αλφαβητοχώρα. Ο κύριος ς διαφήμιζε τα φρέσκα λαχανικά του στο μανάβικο δείχνοντας με καμάρι πως το μαρούλι είχε ακόμα την πρωινή δροσιά. Η κυρία ς πήγαινε το παιδί της στο νηπιαγωγείο και ο μικρός ξ χαμουριόταν και τον έπαιρνε ο ύπνος όταν η μαμά του σταματούσε πριν διασχίσει το δρόμο. Ο τροχονόμος κύριος ς ρύθμιζε την κυκλοφορία κουνώντας γρήγορα τα χέρια του και σφυρίζοντας δυνατά με τη φάλτσα σφουρίχτρα του. Η θέση του ήταν έξω ακριβώς από το σχολείο και πάντα τον χαιρετούσα όταν τον έβλεπα. Ποτέ δεν μπορούσα να πω με σιγουριά αν η κίνηση που έκανε εκείνος με το χέρι του ήταν για να με χαιρετήσει ή για να δώσει κάποιο σήμα στους οδηγούς.

Μπήκα στην αυλή του σχολείου και βρήκα τους φίλους μου ς και ς στο μέρος που καθόμασταν συνήθως πριν αρχίσει το μάθημα. Η μέρα, αν και έμοιαζε σαν όλες τις άλλες μέρες στην Αλφαβητοχώρα, ήταν στην πραγματικότητα πολύ διαφορετική. Είχα πάρει μια σημαντική απόφαση και ένοιωθα πια έτοιμος να την πραγματοποιήσω.

«Θα έρθετε μαζί μου; Το έχω αποφασίσει, σήμερα ξεκινώ».

«Είσαι τρελός» απάντησε ο ς και κοίταξε τον ς. Εκείνος έγεννε πως συμφωνούσε.

«Το έχω σκεφτεί καλά. Ανεξάρτητα από τη δική σας απόφαση, εγώ θα ξεκινήσω σήμερα. Θα έρθετε μαζί μου;»

«Πρέπει να το ξανασκεφτείς» είπε ο ς. «Ξέρεις πως είναι πολύ επικίνδυνα πέρα από το αριστερό περιθώριο. Αυτό που πας να κάνεις είναι καθαρή τρέλα».

«Πώς το ξέρεις; Κανείς ποτέ δεν έχει πάει πέρα από το αριστερό περιθώριο. Πώς μπορείς να ξέρεις ότι είναι επικίνδυνα;»

«Ούτε τη σβήστρα έχουμε συναντήσει ποτέ αλλά ξέρουμε πως είναι επικίνδυνη» είπε ο ς σκεπτικός αλλά σίγουρος για το επιχείρημά του.

«Δεν είναι το ίδιο» αμύνθηκα. «Τα γέρικα γράμματα έχουν δει τη σβήστρα και μέσα από τις ιστορίες τους ξέρουμε ότι είναι επικίνδυνη για εμάς που είμαστε γραμμένοι με μολύβι. Με το αριστερό περιθώριο δεν είναι το ίδιο. Κανείς δεν ξέρει τι υπάρχει πέρα από το αριστερό περιθώριο γιατί ποτέ κανείς δεν έχει πάει».

Στην Αλφαβητοχώρα τα παιδιά ξεχώριζαν από τους μεγάλους από τον τρόπο που ήταν γραμμένα. Όλα τα ανήλικα γράμματα ήταν γραμμένα με μολύβι μέχρι την ενηλικίωσή τους. Τότε, όταν κλείναμε τις 200 σελίδες ζωής, ο Ορθογράφας, ανώτατος άρχοντας της Αλφαβητοχώρας, μετέγραφε με μπλε στυλό τους άντρες και κόκκινο στυλό τις γυναίκες. Η μέρα της μετεγγραφής ήταν από τις πιο σημαντικές μέρες της ζωής ενός γράμματος. Εξαιτίας της μολυβένιας, ευαίσθητης φύσης τους, η σβήστρα ήταν ο πιο μεγάλος φόβος των ανήλικων γραμμάτων. Τα πιο παλιά γράμματα διηγούνταν πολλές ιστορίες για τις επιθέσεις της σβήστρας στην Αλφαβητοχώρα και την αγωνιά που σκόρπισε στη χώρα μας όσες φορές εμφανίστηκε. Σύμφωνα με τις ιστορίες, η σβήστρα εξαφάνιζε αδιάκριτα όποιο γράμμα γραμμένο με μολύβι δεν προλάβαινε να προφυλαχθεί. Τα πιο ηλικιωμένα γράμματα, εκείνα που ήταν πολύ καλλιγραφικά γραμμένα και είχαν αρχίσει να ξεθωιάζουν, μπορούσαν να θυμηθούν τουλάχιστον δέκα εμφανίσεις της.

Αν και σεβόμουν πολύ τα ηλικιωμένα γράμματα για τη σοφία τους, κάποιες φορές οι ιστορίες για τη σβήστρα μου φαινόταν υπερβολικές. Μερικές φορές αναρωτιόμουν αν όντως υπήρχε ή ήταν απλά ένας τρόπος των μεγάλων να τρομάζουν τα παιδιά και τα έφηβα γράμματα όταν δεν συμπεριφέρονταν με σύνταξη και γραμματική.

Ακόμα και αν μερικές φορές είχα αμφιβολίες για την ύπαρξη της σβήστρας, ήταν πολλά τα γράμματα που έλεγαν πως την είχαν δει και όλοι είχαμε ακούσει πολλές ιστορίες για εκείνη. Αντίθετα, το αριστερό περιθώριο ήταν κάτι που φοβούνταν όλα τα γράμματα της Αλφαβητοχώρας χωρίς κανένα να ξέρει το λόγο. Από τη στιγμή της γέννησής μας και όσο μεγαλώναμε, όλα τα γράμματα κινούμασταν από δεξιά προς τα αριστερά και μαθαίναμε πως όταν πλησιάζαμε το αριστερό περιθώριο έπρεπε να αλλάζουμε γραμμή. Κανείς δεν ήξερε τι υπήρχε πέρα από το αριστερό περιθώριο αλλά όλοι άλλαζαν γραμμή φοβισμένοι όταν το πλησίαζαν. Αυτή η κατάσταση μου είχε κάνει εντύπωση από όταν ήμουν πολύ μικρό γράμμα. Κάθε φορά που το πλησίαζα σκεφτόμουν πως όταν μεγαλώσω, θα ταξιδέψω πέρα από το αριστερό περιθώριο κι ας λένε πως είναι επικίνδυνο.

«Λοιπόν, θα έρθετε μαζί μου ή όχι;»

«Εγώ συνεχίζω να πιστεύω πως είσαι τρελός. Είναι πολύ επικίνδυνα πέρα από το αριστερό περιθώριο» απάντησε ο ʘ αρνητικά.

«Είμαστε μόλις 150 σελίδων και θέλεις να κάνεις ένα ταξίδι που τα πιο σοφά γράμματα αποφεύγουν» είπε ο ʘ. «Δεν θα σε ακολουθήσω».

«Εντάξει λοιπόν. Θα τα πούμε ξανά σε μερικές μέρες. Είμαι σίγουρος πως θα έχω πολλές ιστορίες να σας πω» απάντησα και τους χαιρέτησα.

«Δεν θα μείνεις για το μάθημα;» ρώτησε ο ʘ.

«Όχι, ξεκινώ αμέσως» απάντησα. «Έχω μια ολόκληρη γραμμή να διανύσω οπότε πρέπει να ξεκινήσω νωρίς».

Τους χαιρέτησα και συνέχισα προς τα αριστερά. Χαιρέτησα τον ʘ, τον γείτονα που του άρεσε να κάθεται στην αυλή του σπιτιού του και να περιμένει τον ταχυδρόμο με την αλληλογραφία του και εκείνος σήκωσε ένα γράμμα για να με χαιρετήσει. Πέρασα μπροστά από το μπακάλικο του κυρίου ʘ, χαιρέτησα τον γιατρό κύριο ʘ, που πήγαινε τρέχοντας να δει κάποιον ασθενή, διέσχισα το ποτάμι που βρισκόταν σε απόσταση δεκαπέντε γραμμμάτων από το αριστερό περιθώριο και στάθηκα μπροστά στο σπίτι του ʘ. Ο ʘ ήταν ένα περιθωριακό, ηλικιωμένο γράμμα που ζούσε μόνο του σε απόσταση οκτώ γραμμμάτων από το αριστερό περιθώριο. Μάλλον με είδε που στάθηκα μπροστά από το σπίτι του γιατί μετά από λίγο βγήκε έξω και κάρφωσε το βλέμμα του πάνω μου.

«Δεν βλέπω συχνά γράμματα εδώ. Πού πηγαίνεις, νεαρέ;»

«Θέλω να πάω πέρα από το αριστερό περιθώριο».

«Δεν φοβάσαι; Είμαι σίγουρος πως έχεις ακούσει ότι είναι πολύ επικίνδυνα τόσο αριστερά».

«Δεν φοβάμαι κάτι που δεν ξέρω» είπα και η κουβέντα μου ξάφνιασε ακόμα και εμένα.

«Τότε, σου εύχομαι καλή τύχη. Να ξέρεις πως όταν ήμουν και εγώ ένα γράμμα γραμμένο με μολύβι, έκανα ένα ταξίδι πέρα από το αριστερό περιθώριο».

Το σχόλιό του με ξάφνιασε. «Εγώ ξέρω πως ποτέ κανένα γράμμα δεν έχει πάει πέρα από το αριστερό περιθώριο».

Το ηλικιωμένο γράμμα χαμογέλασε. «Δεν το είπα ποτέ σε κανέναν. Εγκαταστάθηκα κοντά στο αριστερό περιθώριο με την υπόσχεση στον εαυτό μου πως θα ενθαρρύνω όποιον αποφασίσει να περάσει από την άλλη μεριά, αλλά να μην μιλήσω ποτέ για το δικό μου ταξίδι».

Η αλήθεια είναι πως πολύ λίγοι έχουν έρθει ως εδώ. Το τελευταίο γράμμα που πλησίασε τόσο κοντά πρέπει να ήταν πριν γεννηθείς. Όσο και αν προσπάθησα να τον ενθαρρύνω, τελικά άλλαξε γραμμή ένα γράμμα πριν το αριστερό περιθώριο».

«Θέλεις να έρθεις μαζί μου;» ρώτησα αν και συνέχιζα να είμαι λίγο επιφυλακτικός με το περιθωριακό, γέρικο γράμμα. Όλοι στην Αλφαβητοχώρα έλεγαν πως δεν ήταν και πολύ καλά στα λογικά του αλλά στο βάθος του μυαλού μου μου ενέπνεε εμπιστοσύνη, σαν αυτή που έχουν οι ταξιδιώτες ο ένας για τον άλλο.

«Μακάρι να μπορούσα αλλά βλέπεις έχω γεράσει πολύ πια» απάντησε.

«Θέλεις να μου δώσεις κάποιες πληροφορίες; Θα με βοηθούσε να ξέρω τι να περιμένω και τι να προσέξω».

«Όχι μόνο δεν θα σε βοηθούσε, αλλά θα σε δυσκόλευε περισσότερο. Οι εμπειρίες και οι επιφυλάξεις των άλλων συνήθως δυσκολεύουν την ανακάλυψη του καινούριου».

«Τότε σου υπόσχομαι πως όταν γυρίσω, θα σε επισκεφθώ και θα σου διηγηθώ το ταξίδι μου» είπα και χαιρέτησα κάνοντας ένα ακόμα βήμα προς τα αριστερά. Μετά έκανα ακόμα ένα και ακόμα ένα και μερικά ακόμα, μέχρι που βρέθηκα μπροστά σε μια ταμπέλα που έγραφε: «Τέλος σελίδας, παρακαλώ αλλάξτε γραμμή».

Είχα ακούσει για αυτή την ταμπέλα. Την είχε τοποθετήσει ο Ορθογράφας σαν την τελευταία προειδοποίηση πριν το αριστερό περιθώριο. Η ταμπέλα σήμαινε πως ήμουν σε απόσταση μόλις ενός γράμματος από το αριστερό περιθώριο. Ήταν φυσικά η πρώτη φορά που έφτανα τόσο κοντά. Το πιο κοντινό μέρος στο αριστερό περιθώριο που είχα φτάσει ποτέ ήταν πριν το ποτάμι. Σήκωσα το πόδι μου έτοιμος να πάω εκεί που μόλις ένα ακόμα γράμμα της Αλφαβητοχώρας είχε πάει και να γραφτεί έτσι με χρυσό γράμμα το όνομά μου στην ιστορία του τόπου μου. Έκλεισα τα μάτια και έκανα δυο βήματα.

Άνοιξα τα μάτια και κοίταξα πίσω μου. Η πινακίδα ήταν σε απόσταση τριών γραμμών, κάτι που σήμαινε πως ήμουν πέρα από το αριστερό περιθώριο. Το κείμενο της πινακίδας είχε αλλάξει και τώρα έγραφε: «ήμμαργ ετζάλλα ώλακαραπ, ζαδίλεσ ζολέΤ». Δεν μπορούσα να καταλάβω τι σήμαινε αυτό, αλλά αποφάσισα να μην ασχοληθώ άλλο με τον κόσμο πριν το αριστερό περιθώριο και να εξερευνήσω τον νέο κόσμο που ανοιγόταν μπροστά μου, μετά το αριστερό περιθώριο. Περιπάτησα κι άλλο προς τα αριστερά με μεγάλη προσοχή, καθώς οι φόβοι των γραμμών της Αλφαβητοχώρας για το άγνωστο του αριστερού περιθωρίου δεν με άφηναν ανεπηρέαστο. Δεν είχα προχωρήσει πολύ όταν είδα να με πλησιάζει από μακριά ένα W. Το άγνωστο σχήμα σταμάτησε μόλις με είδε και με ρώτησε:

«Τι είσαι;»

«Είμαι ένα γράμμα. Εσύ;»

«Εγώ είμαι ένα γράμμα, αλλά εσύ δεν μοιάζεις με γράμμα» απάντησε το W και με κοίταξε καχύποπτα.

«Ούτε εσύ μοιάζεις με γράμμα» απάντησα εγώ. «Πρώτα απ' όλα, κινείσαι από αριστερά προς τα δεξιά, ενώ όλα τα γράμματα κινούνται από δεξιά προς τα αριστερά».

«Τι είναι αυτά που λες; Όλοι ξέρουν πως τα γράμματα κινούνται από αριστερά προς τα δεξιά. Μάλιστα τώρα μόλις ήμουν έτοιμος να αλλάξω γραμμή γιατί είμαι κοντά στο δεξί περιθώριο».

«Εννοείς το αριστερό περιθώριο».

«Όχι, εννοώ το δεξί περιθώριο. Δεν υπάρχει αριστερό περιθώριο. Ξεκινάμε πάντα από αριστερά και κινούμαστε προς τα δεξιά μέχρι το δεξί περιθώριο. Ποτέ δεν πηγαίνουμε πέρα από το δεξί περιθώριο γιατί όλοι λένε πως εκεί είναι πολύ επικίνδυνα τόσο δεξιά».

«Όταν λες δεξί περιθώριο εννοείς προς τα εκεί;» ρώτησα δείχνοντας την κατεύθυνση από την οποία είχα έρθει όταν άρχισα να καταλαβαίνω περίπου τι συνέβαινε.

«Ναι, εκεί εννοώ. Εσύ από πού είσαι;»

«Έρχομαι από την Αλφαβητοχώρα, η οποία είναι πριν το αριστερό περιθώριο» είπα και γρήγορα διόρθωσα «εννοώ, μετά το δεξί περιθώριο, όπως το βλέπεις εσύ».

Το W με κοίταξε τώρα με μεγάλη έκπληξη.

«Δηλαδή, θέλεις να πεις πως ζεις πέρα από το δεξί περιθώριο;» είπε και χαμήλωσε τον τόνο της φωνής του.

Χαμογέλασα γιατί θυμήθηκα πως και στην Αλφαβητοχώρα χαμηλώνουμε τη φωνή μας όταν μιλάμε για το αριστερό περιθώριο.

«Ναι, από εκεί είμαι» απάντησα εγώ με μια μικρή περηφάνια.

«Για αυτό δεν μοιάζεις με κανένα άλλο γράμμα που ξέρω» απάντησε το W. «Δεν είναι επικίνδυνα εκεί;» ρώτησε.

«Καθόλου επικίνδυνα» απάντησα χαμογελώντας. «Ξέρεις, και εμείς στην Αλφαβητοχώρα πιστεύουμε πως είναι πολύ επικίνδυνα πέρα από το αριστερό περιθώριο».

«Στη χώρα μου; Όχι, καθόλου! Είμαστε ήσυχα και ειρηνικά γράμματα. Σκέψου πως ακόμα και τα φωνήεντα της Γραμματοχώρας σχεδόν δεν έχουν φωνή. Θέλεις να γνωρίσεις και άλλα γράμματα;

«Φυσικά!»

«Προχώρησε γύρω στα 30 γράμματα και θα σε συναντήσω εκεί μαζί με τους φίλους μου. Πρέπει βλέπεις να αλλάξω γραμμή, εγώ δεν μπορώ να κινηθώ προς τα αριστερά».

«Εντάξει. Θα σε δω εκεί».

«Πριν φύγω όμως, ξέχασα να συστηθώ. Είμαι ο W» είπε και πρότεινε το χέρι του.

«Χάρηκα πολύ. Είμαι ο Ψ απάντησα και του έδωσα και εγώ το χέρι μου.

«Τα λέμε σε λίγο, Ψ» είπε και αμέσως άλλαξε γραμμή.

Συνέχισα την πορεία μου προς τα αριστερά και μετά από λίγο έφτασα στα πρώτα σπίτια της Γραμματοχώρας. Στο δρόμο συνάντησα και άλλα γράμματα της Γραμματοχώρας, τον G, την F και τον L που και οι τρεις όταν με είδαν σταμάτησαν για να με ρωτήσουν με ενδιαφέρον ποιος ήμουν και από πού ερχόμουν. Με μεγάλη χαρά τους εξήγησα πως είμαι από την Αλφαβητοχώρα και τους μίλησα για τις διαφορές που έχει η δική μου πατρίδα σε σχέση με τη δική τους. Τους είπα πως τα γράμματα που ζουν πέρα από το δεξί περιθώριο (τους εξήγησα βέβαια πως για εμάς είναι το αριστερό περιθώριο) είναι πολύ φιλικά και καθόλου μα καθόλου επικίνδυνα. Τους είπα πως πήγαινα να συναντήσω τον W σε μερικά γράμματα και συμφώνησαν να αλλάξουν και εκείνοι γραμμή και να συναντηθούμε όλοι μαζί.

Η συνάντησή με ένα γράμμα που πηγαίνει από αριστερά προς τα δεξιά ήταν πολύ διαφορετική από τη συνάντησή με ένα γράμμα που πηγαίνει από δεξιά προς τα αριστερά. Όταν συναντούσα κάποιον στην Αλφαβητοχώρα έπρεπε να του φωνάξω για να με περιμένει ή να τρέξω πιο γρήγορα για να τον προλάβω. Με τον ίδιο τρόπο, αν κάποιος με συναντούσε έπρεπε να μου φωνάξει ή να τρέξει πιο γρήγορα για να με προλάβει. Στη Γραμματοχώρα ήταν η πρώτη φορά που συναντούσα άλλα γράμματα με τέτοιο τρόπο ώστε και οι δύο ταυτόχρονα να δούμε ο ένας τον άλλο και να πάμε προς το μέρος του χωρίς να το προσπαθήσουμε. Η συνάντησή εδώ ήταν απλά το αποτέλεσμα της κίνησής μας και γινόταν χωρίς να χρειαστεί να αλλάξουμε ρυθμό. Εγώ πήγαινα από δεξιά προς τα αριστερά, εκείνος από αριστερά προς τα δεξιά και η συνάντησή μας ήταν κάτι που θα συνέβαινε έτσι κι αλλιώς. Έτσι συνάντησα τον G, την F και τον L, έτσι θα

συναντούσα τον W και τους φίλους του και έβρισκα αυτόν τον νέο τρόπο συναντήσεων πολύ πιο ωραίο από εκείνον που ήξερα.

Έφτασα στο σημείο που είχαμε συμφωνήσει με τον W και τον βρήκα να είναι εκεί με πολλά άλλα γράμματα. Ήταν ο G, η F και ο L που ήξερα ήδη αλλά και ο C, η O, ο Q και η D. Αρχισα να τους λέω για την Αλφαβητοχώρα και τα γράμματα που πηγαίνουν από δεξιά προς τα αριστερά και όλοι με κοιτούσαν με έκπληξη και θαυμασμό. Παρατήρησα πως η D με κοιτούσε λίγο ανυπόμονη και έμοιαζε να θέλει να μου πει κάτι. Διέκοψα τη διήγησή μου και τη ρώτησα ευγενικά: «Τι σκέφτεσαι;»

«Να, βασικά... Σκεφτόμουν πως μαζί θα μπορούσαμε να κάνουμε μια βάρκα με πανί και να ταξιδέψουμε» είπε και χαμήλωσε το βλέμμα.

«Τι εννοείς;»

«Να, εσύ είσαι ο Ϛ εγώ είμαι η D, αν βάλεις τα γράμματά μας μαζί σχηματίζεται μια βάρκα με πανί».

Προσπάθησα να φέρω την εικόνα στο μυαλό μου και είδα πως είχε δίκιο η D. Μαζί σχηματίζαμε μια βάρκα με πανί.

«Θέλεις;» με ρώτησε και αυτή τη φορά με κοίταξε στα μάτια και τα μάτια της έλαμπαν.

«Τι να θέλω;»

«Να ταξιδέψουμε σε όλο τον κόσμο! Αν γίνουμε βάρκα δεν θα έχουμε τους περιορισμούς που έχουμε σαν γράμματα. Θα μπορούμε να πηγαίνουμε μπροστά, πίσω, αριστερά και δεξιά και δεν θα χρειάζεται να αλλάζουμε γραμμές. Θέλω πολύ να δω την Αλφαβητοχώρα και άλλες χώρες ακόμα πιο μακριά».

Δεν χρειάστηκε να επιμείνει πολύ περισσότερο. Ο ενθουσιασμός της ήταν τόσο μεγάλος που μόλις είπα το να ξεκινήσαμε αμέσως για το πρώτο μας ταξίδι, το οποίο συμφωνήσαμε να είναι στην Αλφαβητοχώρα. Όσο πηγαίναμε προς την πατρίδα μου σκέφτηκα πως θα μπορούσαν να γίνουν και άλλα ωραία σχήματα με γράμματα της Αλφαβητοχώρας και της Γραμματοχώρας. Αποφάσισα όταν θα φτάναμε στην Αλφαβητοχώρα να μιλούσα για όλα αυτά στους συμπατριώτες μου. Έπρεπε να μάθουν πως πέρα από το αριστερό περιθώριο υπάρχει η Γραμματοχώρα όπου τα γράμματα πηγαίνουν από αριστερά προς τα δεξιά και έτσι οι συναντήσεις είναι διαφορετικές. Ήθελα ακόμα να τους πω πως θα μπορούσαν μαζί με τα γράμματα της Γραμματοχώρας να σχηματίσουν σχήματα όπως εγώ και η D μια βάρκα με πανί ή η O και ο Ɔ ένα μπαλόνι. Αποφάσισα ακόμα μαζί με την D να γυρίσουμε όλο τον κόσμο και να γυρίσουμε πίσω μόνο όταν θα έχουμε περάσει και το τελευταίο περιθώριο της τελευταίας σελίδας. Όταν θα κουραζόμασταν, θα γυρίζαμε πίσω στην Αλφαβητοχώρα και θα μιλούσα μέρες ολόκληρες για τα ταξίδια μου σε εκείνο το περιθωριακό, γέρικο γράμμα.

Alphabetland

Georgios Ampatzidis. Greece

It was an ordinary day in Alphabetland. Mr. ϣ was promoting his fresh vegetables at the grocery store, proudly showing how the lettuce was still moist with morning dew. Mrs. ف was taking her child to the kindergarten. Little ε yawned and fell asleep as his mother stopped before going across the street. Mr. Ϸ, the traffic cop, was directing traffic, moving his hands rapidly about and loudly blowing his discordant whistle. He was stationed just outside the school and I always waved when I saw him. I could never tell for certain if he was waving back or directing traffic.

I entered the schoolyard and found my friends ئ and ط where we usually sat before class. Although it seemed the same as any other day in Alphabetland, today was in fact very different. I had made an important decision and felt ready to act on it.

“Are you coming with me? I’ve decided; I’m starting today.”

“You’re crazy,” ئ answered, glancing at ط, who nodded in agreement.

“I’ve considered it carefully. Whatever you decide, I’m starting today. Are you coming with me?”

“You should think that over again,” said ط. “You know that it’s very dangerous beyond the left margin. What you’re going to do is sheer madness.”

“How do you know? No one has ever gone beyond the left margin. How can you know whether it’s dangerous or not?”

“We’ve never seen the eraser either, but we know that he’s dangerous,” ئ said pensively, but sure of his argument.

“That’s not the same,” I said defensively. “The elder letters have seen the eraser

and we know through their stories that he’s dangerous for those of us who are written in pencil. The left margin is different. No one knows what’s beyond the left margin because no one has ever gone there.”

In Alphabetland, children were distinguished from adults by the way they were written. All underage letters were written in pencil until adulthood. Then, when we were 200 pages old, the Spelling Enforcer, highest superior of Alphabetland, registered the men in blue ink and the women in red. The day of registration was one of the most important in a letter’s life. Because of their delicate pencil nature, the eraser was the greatest terror for young letters. The elder letters told many stories of the eraser’s assaults in Alphabetland and the anguish he spread whenever he appeared. According to these stories, the eraser indiscriminately eliminated any letter written in pencil not quick enough to guard himself. The oldest calligraphic letters, those which had begun to fade, could remember at least ten of these attacks. Even though I deeply respected the elder letters for their wisdom, sometimes these stories about the eraser seemed exaggerated to me. Sometimes I wondered if they really happened, or if this was just a way for the elders to scare young and adolescent letters when they misbehaved in their grammar and syntax.

Even though I sometimes had doubts about the eraser’s existence, many letters said that they had seen him and we had all heard the many stories. In contrast, the left margin was something which all the letters of Alphabetland feared, but without anyone knowing the reason. From the moment of our birth and

as we grew up, all letters moved from right to left and we learned that when we approached the left margin, we had to change line. No one knew what lay beyond the left margin, but everyone changed line in fear when approaching it. This situation had impressed me from the time I was a very young letter. Every time I approached, I thought that when I grew up, I would travel beyond that left margin, even though they said it was dangerous.

“So are you coming with me or not?”

“I still think you’re crazy. It’s very dangerous beyond the left margin,” ط retorted.

ط said, “We’re only 150 pages old and you want to go where the wisest letters will not. I won’t come with you.”

“Okay then. We’ll talk again in a few days. I’m sure that I’ll have many stories to share with you,” I answered and bid farewell.

“Aren’t you staying for class?” asked ط.

“No, I’m starting right away,” I answered. “I have an entire line to travel, so I must start early.”

I said goodbye and continued left. I said goodbye to ل, the neighbour who liked to sit in the yard of the house and wait for the postman with his mail and he lifted a letter to bid me farewell. I passed in front of Mr. ك’s grocery store and said goodbye to Doctor م, who was running to see a patient. I crossed the river, just fifteen letters from the left margin and stood in front of ص’s house. ص was a marginal and aged letter who lived alone, eight letters from the left margin. He must have seen me as I stood outside his house as, after a bit, he came out and fixed his gaze on me.

“I don’t see letters here very often. Where are you headed young letter?”

“I want to go beyond the left margin.”

“Aren’t you afraid? I’m sure you’ve heard that it’s very dangerous so far to the left.”

“I’m not afraid of something which I don’t know,” I said, surprising even myself.

“Then I wish you good luck. I must tell you that when I was a letter written in pencil, I travelled beyond the left margin.”

These words astounded me. “I know that no letter has ever gone beyond the left margin.”

The elderly letter smiled. “I never told anyone. I made my home close to the left margin with a promise to myself that I would encourage whoever decides to go to the other side, but never to speak of my own journey. Truly, very few have come this far. The last time a letter came this close must have been before you were born. As much as I tried to encourage him, in the end he changed line one letter before the left margin.”

“Would you like to come with me?” I asked, even though I was still a bit wary of this marginal old letter. Everyone in Alphabetland said that he wasn’t very sound of mind, but I still felt that I could trust him, like the trust travellers have in each other.

“I wish I could, but as you see, I’m too old.”

“Could you give me some pointers? It would help me to know what to expect and what to be careful of.”

“Not only would that not help you, it would make it all the more difficult. Experience and warnings from others usually impede a voyager’s discovery.”

“Then I promise that when I return, I’ll visit you and tell you the story of my voyage,” I said, waving goodbye and taking another step to the left. Another step, another and still some more, until I was in front of a sign which read: “End of the page, please change line.”

I had heard about this sign. The Spelling Enforcer had put it there as a final warning before the left margin. The sign meant that I was only one letter away from the left margin. It was of course the first time that I had come so close. The closest point to the left

margin that I had ever come was before the river. I raised my foot to step where only one letter from Alphabetland had ever gone, for my name to shine as a golden letter in my nation's history. I closed my eyes and took two steps.

I opened them and looked back. The sign was now three letters away. This could only mean that I was now beyond the left margin. The text of the sign had changed and it now wrote: "*enil egnahc esaelp egap eht fo dnE.*" I couldn't understand what this meant, but decided not to think any more about the world before the left margin and to explore this new world unfolding in front of me after the left margin. I continued further left cautiously, still remembering Alphabetland's letters' fears of the unknown beyond the left margin. I hadn't got far when I saw a W approaching from the distance. The unknown form stopped when it saw me and asked:

"What are you?"

"I'm a letter. What are you?"

"I'm a letter... you don't look like a letter," W answered looking at me sceptically.

"You don't look like a letter either," I replied. "Firstly, you're moving from left to right, but all letters move from right to left."

"What do you mean? Everyone knows that letters move from left to right. In fact I was just ready to change line because I'm close to the right margin."

"You mean the left margin."

"No, I mean the right margin. There is no left margin. We always start from the left and move to the right until the right margin. We never go beyond the right margin because everyone says that it's very dangerous so far to the right."

"When you say 'right margin', do you mean that way?" I asked, showing the direction from which I had come when I had started to understand something of what was happening.

"Yes, I mean that way. Where are you from?"

"I come from Alphabetland, which is before the left margin. I mean after the right margin from your perspective," I said, quickly correcting myself.

W looked at me in astonishment.

"Do you mean to say that you live beyond the right margin?" he pondered, lowering the tone of his voice.

I smiled, remembering how we also lower our voices when speaking about the left margin in Alphabetland.

"Yes, I'm from there," I answered, a little proudly.

"Ah, that's why you don't look like any letter I know," W answered. "Isn't it dangerous there?" he asked.

"It's not dangerous at all," I answered smiling. "It's funny, in Alphabetland, we also believe that it's very dangerous beyond the left margin."

"In my homeland? No, not at all! We're kind and peaceful letters. Even the vowels in Letterland barely have any voice. Would you like to meet some other letters?"

"Of course!"

"Go on ahead about 30 letters and I'll meet you there together with some of my friends. You see I have to change line. I can't go left."

"Fine. I'll meet you there."

"Oh, but before I go, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm W," he said, offering his hand.

"I'm pleased to meet you. I'm Ƶ," I answered, returning the handshake.

"We'll see each other soon Ƶ," he said, immediately changing line.

I continued to the left and after a bit, came to the first houses in Letterland. On my way, I met more Letterland letters, G, F and L, who all stopped when they saw me and asked with interest who I was and from where I had

come. With great pleasure, I told them that I was from Alphabetland, explaining the differences between my homeland and theirs. I told them how letters living beyond the right margin (making clear of course that for us, this was the left margin) are very friendly and not in any way dangerous. I told them that I was on my way to meet W in a few letters and they agreed to change line as well so that we could all meet together.

Meeting a letter going from left to right was very different from meeting a letter travelling from right to left. When I met someone in Alphabetland, I had to call for them to wait, or run faster to catch up. In the same way, if someone met me, he would have to shout or run faster to catch up with me. In Letterland, for the first time I could meet other letters in a way that we could both see each other at the same time, going toward each other without effort. Meeting here was simply the result of our movement and required no change of pace. I went from right to left, he, from left to right, so our meeting was inevitable. In this way I met G, F and L, and would meet W and his friends, finding this new way to meet much nicer than the way I had previously known.

I arrived at the point where we had agreed to meet with W, finding him there with many other letters. There were G, F and L whom I already knew and C, O, Q and D. I started telling them about Alphabetland and the letters that go from right to left and they all looked at me with wonder and admiration. I noticed that D looked at me a bit impatiently, as if she wanted to tell me something. I stopped my story and asked her gently: "What are you thinking?"

"Well, basically... I was thinking that we might build a boat and travel together," she said timidly, lowering her eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you're ζ , I'm D, if you put our letters together, they form a boat with a sail."

I tried to picture it in my mind and saw that D was right. Together we did form a boat with a sail.

"Would you like to?" she asked, looking deeply into my eyes, with a radiant gaze.

"Like to what?"

"To travel together all over the world! If we become a boat, we won't have the limits which we have as letters. We'll be able to go forward, backward, left and right, without ever having to change lines. I would love to see Alphabetland and other lands even further away."

It wasn't necessary for her to insist much more. Her enthusiasm was so great that as soon as I said yes, we set out instantly on our first journey, which we agreed to be Alphabetland. As we approached my homeland, I thought of how many other pretty forms could be made with letters from Alphabetland and Letterland. I decided that when we got to Alphabetland, I would tell my compatriots about all these things. They had to learn about Letterland beyond the left margin, where letters go from left to right, thereby meeting differently. I also wanted to tell them that together with letters from Letterland, they could form shapes like me with D, a boat with a sail, or O with O , a balloon. I also decided to travel all over the world, together with D and return only when we came to the final margin of the last page. When we got tired, we would return to Alphabetland and I would recount my journeys for days on end to that marginal elderly letter.

Singladura

Pablo Sáiz Hernansanz. España

Me encontraba despierto, empapado por un sudor frío que caía por mi frente y cada gota la sentía como una punzada que me impedía olvidar el dolor físico y las náuseas de este mundo enfermo, más enfermo que yo.

Respiraba de forma pausada, porque sabía que era la mejor manera para estabilizar los latidos que resonaban en mi cabeza cada noche. Miraba mis manos y podía observar la impotencia convertida en limitación y en un desgarrador sentimiento de culpa y odio hacia mí mismo. Esas mismas manos eran las que tapaban mi rostro durante muchas horas al día, sirviendo de barrera separadora entre mi mundo interior de caos incontrolable y el exterior lleno de obstáculos y desesperación.

–¡Todos arriba, es la hora del desayuno! –gritó una voz desde el fondo de la sala.

Escuché las cortinas correr por el tubo metálico que las sostenía, arañándolas con un sonido rasgado, haciendo pasar una lámina de luz ingravida que chocaba contra mis manos aún en mi rostro. Se notaba un calor especial, una caricia que hablaba, intentando explicarme que días malgastados son oportunidades perdidas. Pero los míos dejaron hace mucho tiempo de existir... me convertí en un alma gris, consumidora de tiempo, llena de vacíos.

–¡Vamos Anwar, despierta o llegaremos tarde a tu rehabilitación!

Me llamo Anwar, tengo 19 años y mi nombre significa luz. Me lo puso mi madre nada más nacer, porque venía a iluminar una casa vacía. Vacía de risas, carente de cariño.

Vivía en un pequeño pueblo bañado por el mar Mediterráneo en la costa del extremo oriental del golfo de Sidra, su nombre es Ajdabiya, situada en el centro norte de Libia. Recuerdo sus llanuras áridas por las que jugaba de pequeño, rodeado de mi familia y amigos, todos aquellos que hoy han desaparecido y que tanto echo de menos, ¿por qué no se llevaron mi vida también? ¿Por qué me dejaron sólo la mitad de ella?

–Anwar, siempre te quedas el último, por favor, intenta cooperar un poquito más como el resto de tus compañeros –me susurró la enfermera Diana más cerca del oído.

Noté el contacto de unas manos suaves y cuidadas contra las mías; ásperas y agrietadas. Y sentí cómo intentaba separarlas de mi rostro aún húmedo de pesadillas carentes de vida, de recuerdos tan exactos como fotografías en movimiento. Y entonces vislumbré ese rostro, impenetrable y serio, pero lleno de una belleza devastadora.

–Es la última vez que te lo digo Anwar, si no te levantas no hay desayuno. Ayer fue el último día que te lo traigo a la cama.

De hecho no sé ni si quiera si es enfermera, creo que se llaman voluntarios, pero no llego a comprender quién quiere acompañar en el sufrimiento a personas que sólo esperan la muerte, con ansia y desesperación. Es inconcebible pensar en gastar un tiempo valioso en limpiar a otros, tanto de sus excrementos como de sus penas mentales. También intentan hacerles ver, que la vida no está llena de tanta mierda como parece, y que las ganas de seguir viviendo se incrementan con pequeños objetivos, como poder levantarse por uno mismo, o no orinarse por las noches, todo un logro vaya...

Pero a mí no me engañan.

Y no lo hacen porque tengo miedo, y le doy gracias, porque sin él no habría mañana. Miedo a pensar que mi nombre sea sólo el recuerdo del pasado, ya que aprendí que de nada sirve ser luz si no vas a iluminar el camino de los demás. Como hizo el relámpago aterrador que cegó mi felicidad y mi futuro.

Voy notando cómo la mano de Diana penetra por mi espalda, llegando hasta la base de la columna, pasando por cada una de las vértebras hasta que dejo de sentirla. Me incorpora de la cama situando una almohada como respaldo, para sujetar el balanceo de mi torso, mientras me acerca a la creadora de mis pesadillas, al puñal de cada gota de sudor que cae noche tras noche sobre mis mejillas, formando caminos que no puedo recorrer.

Odio el chirriar de esa silla, sus ruedas delanteras se agitan como si el demonio estuviera dentro de ellas, y me la pone a mi lado. Con un gesto enérgico, extendiendo mi mano empujando la silla, queriendo destruirla, pero no me doy cuenta que se ha parado en la pierna de Diana, golpeándola bruscamente.

—Anwar, por favor. Sólo estamos aquí para ayudarte, pero no podremos conseguirlo si tú eres el que no quieres —contestó con los ojos vidriosos que iluminaban su rostro.

—P...pe... pe, perdona —contesté con la garganta seca y el orgullo a un lado.

Entre los dos conseguimos disponerme en la silla. Ella me empujaba mientras yo me miraba las palmas de las manos y acompañaba el movimiento con la vista hasta llegar a mis piernas, o mejor dicho, donde deberían estar.

Aún recuerdo la mañana, de hace tres años, en la que jugaba con mis amigos en el descampado a las afueras de la ciudad, a pocos metros de la carretera que enlaza Ajdabiya con Bengasi. Nos observaba mi madre Liynaa junto a sus vecinas, que esperaban a la furgoneta de trabajadores de la compañía eléctrica de la que formaba parte mi padre Sayyid. Nosotros correteábamos sobre la tierra, y levantábamos un polvo blanquecino que se perdía a causa de la ligera brisa proveniente de la llanura. En el horizonte se perdía una línea recta de asfalto irregular por la que, siempre antes del anochecer, se vislumbraba aquel automóvil blanco y viejo como el polvo del camino.

Pero ese día fue distinto, todos observábamos reunidos cómo se acercaba aquella furgoneta. La pelota con la que jugábamos la agarraba con fuerza entre mi mano derecha y la cintura, y sea por lo que fuere, el destino o magia negra, la fuerza de presión cedió, dejando escapar la pelota golpeando mi pié derecho. Ésta empezó a rodar entre las piernas de mis amigos y yo agachado la perseguí a como quien escapa de la muerte.

Al recogerla, me giré. Fuera del alcance del grupo numeroso observaba la escena. En cuanto esa furgoneta dejaba la carretera para aparcar en el campo de tierra, observé perfectamente cómo una rueda penetraba en el terreno, activando una trampilla que bajó y subió aplastando un artefacto extraño, cubierto por la tierra, semienterrado, era una mina. La que acabó con mis padres y amigos que se encontraban a su lado y la misma que hizo que restos de metralla se clavaran por todo mi cuerpo, especialmente en las piernas, creando un daño irreparable, más en el alma que en las piernas, que tuvieron que ser cortadas para salvar el resto del cuerpo pero amputando cualquier tipo de esperanza.

Me adentraba en la «Sala de la Muerte», era una habitación muy amplia, iluminada por unos lucernarios de una cubierta hecha de madera, las vigas se enlazaban entre sí creando una cercha que sujetaba de manera casi mística un espacio enorme, sin un solo pilar que rompiera la

monotonía de esta sala inmersa en luz. Esta misma habitación, servía de comedor y de lugar de rehabilitación para los más necesitados. En la «Sala de la Muerte», solíamos estar aquellos que la sociedad no quería, y que unos pocos se entregaban en cuerpo y alma por intentar salvar la dignidad que nos quedaba. Esta gente, trabajaba por poco más que cobijo y alimento, sus asociaciones se veían mermadas cada vez más a la hora de ayudar, ya que la situación en estos países se consideraba misión de alto riesgo, pero no se rendían nunca. Se encargaban de despertarnos, darnos la comida a lo largo del día, ayudarnos en nuestros ejercicios físicos y prepararnos mentalmente para un regalo místico casi divino, una vida llena de vida, de oportunidades y optimismo. Nosotros sólo veíamos tristeza, agonía y muerte. Por eso le pusimos ese nombre al albergue, porque no queríamos engañarnos a nosotros mismos, perdiendo la finalidad de nuestro destino.

Esa mañana, el cocinero Julien había preparado huevos cocidos, era domingo, y los domingos se preparaban a los afectados de una manera especial. Ponían globos decorando la gran sala, y les vestían con camisa y pantalón, porque aquellos que aún tenían algo de familia, esperaban con fe una visita de misericordia. La mayoría eran ancianos, afectados por la enfermedad de la soledad y el desánimo de haber perdido a sus hijos o nietos. Otros como yo habían perdido parte de su cuerpo por metralla «amiga» en disturbios en sus barrios. Y por último estaban los «Renegados» aquellos que sus familias abandonaban en la parte norte del cobertizo, cerca del lago. Normalmente eran bebés de familias pobres y sin recursos, gente que buscaba un cambio en sus vidas y emigraban a países vecinos.

En ese momento vi a Diana acercarse con un bulto entre sus brazos.

–Toma Anwar, cuídame un segundo, ahora mismo vuelvo –comentó mientras se alejaba hacia la cocina.

Por un momento no me di cuenta de lo que había depositado aquella monitora sobre mí, hasta que algo tocó mi mano.

Me estremecí al notar que tenía a un «Renegado» entre ellas. Un bebé me miraba con los ojos muy abiertos, su pelo azabache y descolocado me recordaba al mío, y su mirada, penetrante como aquellos rayos de luz que caían cenitalmente, me bendecía con una sonrisa inesperada, correspondida por unos labios que hacía mucho tiempo que no lo hacían.

–Muchas gracias Anwar. Necesitaba un poco de leche para el pequeño Omar –dijo Diana mientras me quitaba al recién nacido de mis brazos. Una mirada de soslayo me interrogó mientras se alejaba, y con cierta incertidumbre, pude observar como Diana miraba aún mis labios sonrientes.

Posicioné cada una de mis manos sobre el metal helado de las grandes ruedas de la silla, hasta ahora nunca había hecho nada por intentar valerme por mí mismo, no debería ser muy difícil. Con mucho cuidado empecé a moverme para acercarme a las ventanas que enmarcaban un pequeño campo de cultivo donde algunos de los voluntarios trabajaban varias horas al día. Otros enseñaban, bajo un pequeño tejadillo, a una docena de niños a leer y cantar. Si miraba dentro de la sala, era donde se encontraban los que necesitaban un cuidado especial.

Continuamente los voluntarios intentaban ayudar y animar a aquellos que más lo necesitaban, unas veces lo conseguían y otras no, pero nunca perdían la ilusión de volver a intentarlo. Era la primera vez que observa con tanto detenimiento el trabajo de estas personas, no tan distintas a mí.

Esa misma noche me prometí algún tipo de cambio, no por los demás, si no por mí mismo. Tenía que ser consciente de la dificultad, pero aún más de mis posibilidades y sin lucha no hay recompensa.

Y cambié. Esa misma mañana el brillo de mis ojos parecía alumbrar las estancias e incluso a las personas que estaban a mi alrededor. Ayudé a Diana en todo lo que pude e iba de aquí para allá yo sólo, sin ayuda de nadie más. Porque notaba más fuerza que nunca, y mi corazón latía más fuerte.

Empecé a ayudar en la «Sala de la Muerte», a los ancianos que no sabían otro idioma que el nuestro. Empecé a ser el intermediario de todas esas personas y también de profesores que querían empapar a los pequeños de sus conocimientos. A las pocas semanas tenía puesta la misma camiseta que los voluntarios, sin ni si quiera yo saber muy bien qué significaba. Si era parte de ellos, de los afectados o una persona como otra cualquiera, parte de unos y otros, mezcla de ánimos y prioridades y ahora la mía la tenía clara: descubrir. Descubrir hasta qué punto era diferente, descubrir en qué momento empecé a serlo, y por qué ahora intentaba cambiarlo. Esas preguntas eran las que me hacían levantarme cada mañana con una intención clara; encontrar un motivo por el cual, sonreír.

Viajábamos a los pueblos más cercanos, enseñábamos a los más pequeños diferentes formas de trabajar la tierra y a los más mayores les contaba las historias que aprendí de mi padre sobre las estrellas, cazadores de constelaciones y dioses enamorados de un cuerpo humano. Y Diana, siempre me venía a la mente su sonrisa, más pura que la luna. Más bella que la nebulosa de Orión.

Un día, volviendo de una excursión al mar, encontré el nexo de unión con esta gente, el acorde puente que me uniera de nuevo a la ilusión de volver cada día a la vida y por consiguiente a la de los demás. Todos se habían reunido en torno a la puerta de entrada formando una fila. Conocía todos sus nombres, sus historias y sus sueños. Los había escuchado, comprendido y abrazado. Porque a veces no hace falta nada más.

Se fueron separando poco a poco, dejando ver un gran cartel que colgaba de la fachada principal de madera: «Casa de la Luz». El silencio era atronador. Mis latidos acompañaban al temblor de unas manos nerviosas y mi rostro se empapaba de unas lágrimas que caían con fuerza, empujadas por el ánimo de toda esta gente, de mi gente. Entre todos habían creado un pequeño bote con sus pequeños ahorros.

Pasaron meses hasta que conseguimos recaudar el dinero suficiente para un vuelo. Un vuelo de esperanza. El mismo vuelo que me ha traído ante ustedes. Sólo quería aprovechar la oportunidad de contaros la historia de una vida que se repite en todos los lugares. Gracias por escucharme, y os reto a intentar conseguir la verdadera esencia de una vida con sentido, cooperativa y sostenible, humana y ética, bella y pura. Entregada al optimismo del amor.

Cientos de ojos me miraban, había contado el relato de mi corta existencia a cientos de políticos y jefes de Estado. No quería beneficios económicos ni ayudas a mi pueblo. Únicamente tenía en mente un objetivo, realizar un pequeño cambio ético en las personas, priorizando en mejoras sociales antes que en beneficios personales. Un apoyo global que pusiera al hombre en el punto de mira de armas como la cooperación y el desarrollo equitativo. No quería emocionar, quería cambiar y concienciar a todas esas personas que olvidan con el tiempo, que existe gente con menos motivos para luchar pero lo hacen, con menos motivos para sonreír pero lo consiguen, con menos motivos para vivir la vida, pero la viven plenamente en los demás. Hay que recordar al hombre de dónde viene, y creer que peleamos todos por lo mismo. Porque existen un tipo de personas que trabajan en silencio y hacen mucho ruido, que cambian destinos y llenan vidas. Gente como tú y como yo, exactamente iguales.

Mi nombre es Anwar y significa luz.

Journey of Life

Pablo Sáiz Hernansanz. Spain

I was awake, drenched by a cold sweat dripping from my forehead, and I was feeling each drop as a twinge that stopped me forgetting the physical pain and the nauseas of this sick world, sicker than me.

I was breathing deeply, because I knew it was the best way to slow down the heartbeats that pounded in my head every night. I looked at my hands and could see the impotence which had become a limitation and a heartrending feeling of guilt and hatred towards myself. These same hands had now covered my face for many hours during the day, acting as a dividing wall between my inner world of uncontrollable chaos and the outer world full of obstacles and desperation.

“Everybody up, breakfast!” shouted a voice from the back of the room.

I heard the curtains sliding along the metal tube they hung from, scratching them with a ripping sound, letting through a weightless sliver of light which clashed against my hands still on my face. I noticed a special warmth, a spoken caress trying to tell me that wasted days are missed opportunities... But mine had ceased to exist long ago... I had become a grey soul, a consumer of time, full of emptiness.

“Come on, Anwar, wake up or we’ll be late for your rehabilitation!”

I’m Anwar, I’m 19 and my name means light. I was given it by my mother as soon as I was born because I came to lighten an empty house; empty of laughs, lacking affection.

I lived in a small village bathed by the Mediterranean Sea on the far eastern coast of the Gulf of Sidra, called Ajdabiya, in the northern centre of Libya. I remember its dry

plains where I used to play when I was a child, surrounded by my family and friends, all gone and greatly missed now. Why didn’t they take my life too? Why did they only leave me half of it?

“Anwar, you’re always the last. Please, try to cooperate a little more like the others,” nurse Diana whispered closer to my ear.

I noticed the contact of soft, well cared for hands against mine, which were rough and cracked. I felt how she was trying to remove them from my face still wet from lifeless nightmares, memories as vivid as moving pictures. And then I glimpsed that face, impenetrable and serious, but full of devastating beauty.

“It’s the last time I’ll tell you, Anwar, if you don’t get up there’ll be no breakfast. Yesterday was the last time I brought it to you in bed.”

In fact, I don’t even know if she is a nurse; I think they call themselves volunteers, but I don’t understand who would want to be with suffering people who are only anxiously and desperately awaiting death. It is inconceivable to think of spending valuable time cleaning up after others, both their excrements and their mental pain. They also try to make them see that life is not as full of shit as it seems, and the will to live is increased by achieving small objectives, such as getting up by yourself or not wetting the bed at night, a real success...

But they can’t fool me.

And they can’t because I feel fear and appreciate it, because without it there would be no tomorrow. The fear of thinking that my name is just the memory of the past as I learnt

that it is not worth being a light if you don't lighten the path of others. As did the terrifying lightning that blinded my happiness and my future.

I gradually feel Diana's hand moving down my back, reaching the base of my spine, moving over each of the vertebrae until I don't feel it anymore. She sits me up in bed and places a pillow behind me, to support my torso, while she moves closer to the maker of my nightmares, to the dagger of each drop of sweat that every night falls upon my cheeks, forming paths that I can't walk along.

I hate the squeaking of that chair, its front wheels shaking as if the devil was inside them, and she places it by my side. With an energetic gesture, I hold my hand out pushing the chair, wanting to destroy it, but I realise that it has stopped at Diana's leg, hitting it sharply.

"Anwar, please, we're here to help you but can only do so if you really want it," she said with the glassy eyes that lit her face.

"So... so... sorry," I answered with my dry throat and my swallowed pride.

Between us we managed to get me on the chair. She was pushing me while I was looking at the palms of my hands and followed the movement with my eyes until reaching my legs, or rather, where my legs had been.

I still remember the morning, three years ago, when I was playing with my friends in the open space on the outskirts of the city, a few metres from the road from Ajdabiya to Bengasi. My mother Liyana was looking at us with the neighbours, who were waiting for the employees' van from the electricity company where my father Sayyid worked. We were running around on the ground, raising a whitish dust carried off by the light breeze from the plain. On the horizon, a straight line of uneven asphalt vanished into the distance on which, always before sunset, we could

make out that white van, old as the dust on the road.

But that day was different. We were all watching the van getting closer. I was holding the ball we were playing with tightly between my right hand and my waist and, whether because of destiny or black magic, my grip loosened, releasing the ball which hit my right foot. It began to roll between my friends' legs as if it was escaping death and, bent over, I ran after it.

When I caught it, I turned round. Away from the crowd I watched the scene. As soon as the van left the road to park in the field, I clearly saw how one wheel sank into the ground, activating a trap which went down and up crushing a strange device, covered by the ground, half-buried: it was a mine. The mine that killed my parents and friends who were standing next to it and sent pieces of shrapnel flying into my body, especially my legs, causing irreparable damage, more to my soul than my legs, which had to be cut off to save the rest of my body while severing any kind of hope.

I was entering the "Room of Death"; a very spacious area, lit by skylights in a wooden roof, the beams interlinked with each other creating a frame that almost mystically supported an enormous space, without a single pillar that broke the monotony of that room immersed in light. It was also used as a dining room and rehabilitation area for the most needy. The "Room of Death" usually took in those that society rejected, run by people devoted body and soul to trying to save the little dignity left to us. They worked for little more than food and shelter, and their associations were increasingly threatened, as the situation in these countries was considered a high-risk mission but they never gave up. They woke us up, gave us food throughout the day, helped us with our physical exercises and prepared us mentally for a mystical, al-

most divine, gift: a life full of life, opportunities and optimism. But we only saw sadness, agony and death. This is why we gave the shelter that name, because we didn't want to fool ourselves, denying our destiny.

That morning, the cook Julien had made hard-boiled eggs. It was Sunday and on Sundays the residents were given a special treatment. They decorated the large room with balloons and dressed them in shirt and trousers because those who still had some relatives hopefully awaited a visit. Most were old people, afflicted by the sickness of solitude and the dejection of having lost their children or grandchildren. Some others like me had lost part of their body because of the "friendly" shrapnel in the upheavals in their neighbourhoods. And, finally, there were the "abandoned", those whose families had left them. They were usually babies of poor families without resources, people who were looking for a change in their lives and who had emigrated to neighbouring countries.

It was then when I saw Diana moving towards me with a bulk between her arms.

"Take him, Anwar, look after him for a second. I'll be right back," she said while heading towards the kitchen.

For a while I didn't realise what she had given me, until something touched my hand. I shivered when I realised I had an abandoned baby in my arms, who was looking at me with his eyes wide open. His black dishevelled hair reminded me of mine, and his expression, sharp as those rays of light that fell from above, blessed me with an unexpected smile, which I returned, something I hadn't done for a long time.

"Thanks a lot, Anwar. I needed some milk for little Omar," said Diana while taking the newborn from my arms. A sidelong glance interrogated me when she moved away and I could just about see how Diana was still looking at my smiling lips.

I placed my hands on the frozen metal of the big wheels of the chair. Until then I hadn't done anything to try to manage on my own; it shouldn't be that difficult. Very carefully, I began to move closer to the windows that framed a small field of crops where some volunteers worked several hours a day. Others were teaching a dozen children to read and sing under a small roof, which I could see was for those who needed special care.

The volunteers were endlessly trying to help and encourage those who most needed it; sometimes they were successful but on other occasions they failed. However, they never stopped trying. It was the first time that I had so carefully observed the work of those people, not so different from me.

That same night I promised myself that I would change, not for the others but for myself. I had to be aware of the difficulties but even more of my potential, and with no struggle there is no reward.

And I did change. That same morning the brightness of my eyes seemed to light up the rooms and even the people around me. I helped Diana with anything I could and I moved around on my own, without anyone's help because I felt stronger than ever and that my heart beat with more intensity.

In the "Room of Death", I began to help the elderly who did not know any other language than ours. I began to be the intermediary for all those people and also for teachers who wanted to impart their knowledge to the youngest. In a few weeks, I was wearing the same T-shirt as the volunteers without really understanding what it meant, whether I was one of them or one of the patients, or a bit of both, a mixture of spirits and priorities. And now I was clear: I wanted to discover. To discover how far I was different, to discover when I began to be so, and why I was trying to change this now. Those questions made me wake up every morning with a clear intention: to find a reason to smile.

We travelled to nearby villages, we showed children different ways of working the land and I told the adults the stories I had learnt from my father about the stars, hunters of constellations and gods in love with humans. And Diana's smile always came to my mind, purer than the moon, more beautiful than the Orion Nebula.

One day, on the way back from an outing to the sea, I discovered the link with those people, the bridge that would unite me again with the hope of returning every day to life and, consequently, to that of the others. Everyone had gathered around the entrance gate forming a line. I knew their names, their stories and their dreams. I had listened to them, understood and embraced them. Because, sometimes, that's all you need.

They were moving aside little by little, letting me see a large sign hanging from the main wooden façade, "House of Light". The silence was deafening. My heartbeats accompanied the shaking of two nervous hands and my face was getting drenched by falling tears, provoked by the spirits of all those people, of my people. They had built a small boat together with their savings.

Months went by until we managed to collect enough money to buy a plane ticket. A flight of hope. The same flight that has

brought me before you. I only wanted to take the opportunity to tell you the story of a life that is repeated everywhere. Thank you for listening to me, and I challenge you to try to achieve the true essence of a meaningful life, cooperative and sustainable, human and ethical, beautiful and pure. Devoted to the optimism of love.

Hundreds of eyes were staring at me. I had told the story of my short existence to hundreds of politicians and heads of state. I did not want economic benefits or aid for my people. I only had one objective in mind: to bring about a small ethical change in people, focusing on social improvements rather than personal benefits. Global support that would place man as the target of weapons such as cooperation and fair development. I wanted to move, I wanted to change and raise the awareness all those people who forget that there are people with fewer reasons to fight but still do so, people with fewer reasons to live life but who live it to the full. We should remind man where he comes from and believe that we are all struggling for the same thing. Because there are people who work in silence and make a lot of noise, who change destinies and fill lives. People like you and like me, exactly the same.

My name is Anwar and it means light.

Na noite que nevou em Lisboa

Corina Lozovan. Portugal

O frio esbarrava contra a porta do prédio enquanto ela subia as escadas para o seu apartamento. Já estava quase a anoitecer e tinha de apressar-se para fazer a corrida diária no parque. Rapidamente mudou de roupa e saiu. Era noite e as luzes dos candeeiros estendiam-se sem fim. A selva urbana parecia cintilar com as suas luzes artificiais. Enquanto caminhava para o parque, ela olhava para as montras e em vez de ver as roupas e os sapatos que convidavam a entrar na loja, ela via-se a si própria, com os seus olhos soturnos e cansados.

O Inverno chegou tarde mas frio, instalando-se confortavelmente, congelando tudo a sua volta. Lisboa estava imbuída num frio melancólico e o reflexo das pessoas perdia-se com o mistério das suas vidas.

Ao virar à esquina, ela reparou num sem-abrigo encostado à porta de um prédio que parecia ser uma empresa. O homem estava bem aconchegado com uma manta e uma almofada atrás das costas. O que ela estranhou mais foi a sua face serena enquanto as mãos seguravam um livro. Os seus olhos pareciam devorar as palavras como se fossem um prato de comida quente. Por momentos parou e ainda pensou em falar com ele, mas continuou para o parque.

Já passavam meses desde que tinha acabado a licenciatura e ainda não tinha nenhuma perspectiva de trabalho. O seu trabalho temporário era demasiado maçador e cada dia que passava, parecia que o tempo se arrastava ainda mais, atrasando as horas. Mas não podia pensar na sua vida outra vez. Enquanto corria, o seu pensamento era invadido por inúmeras preocupações.

Esta noite custava-lhe correr. Afinal, nada parecia estar bem. Tudo estava incerto. Noutro dia tinha falado com vários amigos que lhe sugeriram que fosse para o estrangeiro mas sem um plano estável, não podia aventurar-se. Talvez se procurasse mais, iria encontrar algo melhor. Entretanto, esquecer-se de fazer o aquecimento antes da corrida e agora tinha de fazê-lo durante mais tempo. De manhã acordou e afinal o aquecimento não lhe poupou as dores nas pernas e nos braços. Rapidamente preparou-se para mais um dia. Como tudo é monotonia, pensara. Fechou a porta e ao descer as escadas do prédio, disse baixinho: mas eu sou monotonia também.

No trabalho, as colegas viviam a monotonia há anos. Às vezes tinha medo de ficar para sempre nesse tédio e muitas vezes questionava-se para quê tinha estudado tanto tempo. Nessa monotonia passava as horas a trabalhar e quando acabava, tinha algum tempo para ler as notícias. Por vezes lia doze jornais mundiais diferentes mas só um ou dois tinham artigos realmente bem escritos com análises profundas. O resto eram notícias sobre a condição mordaz da humanidade, notícias que já não as conseguia ler.

Nessa quarta-feira acabou por ir para casa mais cedo e como começara a chover, adiou a corrida para o dia seguinte.

De manhã quando chegou ao trabalho tinha um bilhete na mesa. Alguém a convidava para sair. Era o Ian, um alemão que trabalhava noutro departamento. Pensou – que bela abordagem – e atirou o bilhete para o lixo. Mais tarde, no intervalo, ele aproximou-se e convidou-a outra vez.

- Queres tomar um café mais tarde? Perguntou discretamente.
- Não tenho muito tempo e a seguir ao trabalho já tenho planos, recusando educadamente. Na verdade, não tinha planos mas a última coisa que queria era sair com alguém.
- Mas não podes adiar? Tentou outra vez.
- Desculpa, não posso mesmo adiar. Mas obrigada, e virou as costas, voltando para o trabalho.

Depois do almoço, as suas colegas estavam outra vez na sessão de coscuvilhices e já sabiam da tampa que tinha dado ao alemão. Uma delas aproximou-se para perguntá-la:

- Sabes que o Ian disse que não querias sair com ele porque era da Alemanha?
- A sua única reacção foi rir.
- E porque ele diria uma coisa destas? Perguntou ainda a rir.
 - Não sei, mas ele disse que nunca se sentiu tão discriminado.
 - Então eu não quis sair e ele acusou-me de xenofobia, disse com um tom de gozo, que deixou a sua colega um pouco incomodada.

Todos os dias de manhã ela entrava na empresa e sentia que estava num talho. Todas as pessoas olhavam e inspeccionavam tudo o que passasse como se fossem um pedaço de carne. Ninguém escapava aos comentários: ou era demasiado gordo ou demasiado magro, ou davam na coca ou era uma puta, ou era um bêbado ou enganava a mulher com a secretária do terceiro andar. Assim, já não era surpresa que as suas colegas soubessem da tampa que tinha dado ao alemão.

Nesse dia, a corrida foi como uma catarse. Depois de atender tantas chamadas a ouvir clientes a queixarem-se, e alguns até a ameaçavam pateticamente, despertando apenas pena, quase que saiu mais cedo pois já não suportava aquele ambiente. As pessoas não estavam bem.

Por isso, somente corria... e enquanto corria até pensava em deixar de fumar, já que se era tão rápida sendo fumadora, se deixasse, seria ainda mais veloz e não se cansaria tanto. Mas, os cigarros sabiam tão bem nos intervalos, e mais do que isso, eram a sua companhia, quando as palavras já não chegavam. Nessa noite também acabou por aproximar-se do sem-abrigo e falar com ele.

- Boa noite – disse com um tom cordial mas talvez demasiado penoso.
- Ele olhou e não disse nada.
- Desculpe incomodá-lo, insisti outra vez, mas não pude deixar de reparar no que estava a ler.

Por acaso, ela conhecia o livro, era o *Notas do Subterrâneo*, de Dostoiévski. Afinal, que grande ironia, alguém nessa situação e estar a ler um livro do russo, pensou sorrindo.

- Já leu? Perguntou mais interessado.
- Sim, já li há algum tempo e, mas ele interrompeu-a, dizendo:

– É cruel mas é verdade. Dostoiévski sabia do que estava a falar. Todos deviam ler os seus livros. Aliás, seria como verem-se ao espelho mas depois não iriam gostar, e acabariam por buscar livros de auto-ajuda.

O homem tem a sua piada, pensou ela e acrescentou:

– Talvez muitos já leram, mas acabaram por esquecer-se porque às vezes é melhor viver sem saber.

– Talvez...repetiu vagamente. Dá-me pena ver as pessoas com pressa e a preocuparem-se tanto, vê-las desesperadamente buzinar nos carros, fingindo que estão atrasadas, como se o mundo irá desabar se não arrancarem rapidamente. Quando os sinais verdes se acendem, os carros já estão a andar, desrespeitando muitas vezes os sinais. Já nem falo dos taxistas...quase parecem a guarda pretoriana. Só lhes falta a vestimenta! Tanta pressa para quê?

– Sim, acenou. No metro vejo o mesmo, multidões que saem e não se desviam, parecem baratas tontas, cada uma com a sua preocupação temporária e depois acaba esmagada nalgum lado.

O homem começou a falar mais baixo até que já estava a divagar. Ela tinha de ir para casa e deu-se conta que começara a pensar na sua vida outra vez. No fundo, não queria envelhecer e sentir-se daquela forma. Ainda tentou perguntar ao homem o porquê não procurava algo melhor.

– Há quanto tempo vive na rua? Perguntou bruscamente.

– Já nem eu sei, disse com um tom seco. A última vez que dormi na minha casa foi quando tinha...e parou de repente.

– Continue, disse ela.

– Não, esta história não é para ser ouvida. Eu também não quero lembrar-me. Diga-me o porquê corres a esta hora, costumo ver-te de vez em quando. Pareces sempre furiosa.

Ela ficou surpreendida pela observação que o homem lhe tinha feito. Não estava propriamente furiosa mas algures perto, num estado de impaciência e frustração.

– Muitas coisas, trabalho e preocupações – evitando subtilmente dar pormenores. Estou também muito cansada, cansada de ver tudo parado, estagnado e como o tempo passa e eu com ele.

– Ah, é assim. Não há muito controlo sobre a vida. Mas és jovem e hás de ter muitas oportunidades. É só saber escolher bem. Mais do que isso não te posso dizer.

– Então, para além disso, só me resta esperar e não fazer nada? Perguntou indignada.

– Mas o quê esperas fazer? Eu vou continuar aqui a ler o meu livro e tu irás para a tua vida.

E foi o que ela fez. Despediu-se do homem e continuou para casa. No dia a seguir foi trabalhar mas saiu mais cedo pois doía-lhe a cabeça. A incerteza caminhava junto dela como se fosse uma sombra e cada vez mais sentia-se assombrada.

No fim-de-semana foi correr mas não viu o sem-abrigo. Segunda-feira saiu mais cedo de propósito para ver se o sem-abrigo tinha voltado lá mas não teve sorte. Nas próximas duas semanas correu todas as noites e mesmo assim não o viu. Acabou por deixar de olhar pois o mais provável era que ele tivesse encontrado outro lugar para dormir.

Nessas semanas, Lisboa tornou-se uma miragem para quem a observasse de longe. Parecia vazia, longe da calçada cheia de gente, com os pés que a pisam incessantemente no Verão. As ruas estendiam-se infinitamente, distorcendo-se por entre prédios, sussurrando na solidão nocturna. As pessoas caminhavam em silêncio e o silêncio silenciava-se também. Afinal, não era a única que se sentia distante. Tudo à sua volta parecia mudo e seco.

Numa noite saiu à rua para correr mas rapidamente arrependeu-se. O frio cortava a roupa e infiltrava-se na pele. Entretanto começou a correr devagar até chegar ao parque. A avenida estava deserta, só passavam os táxis e os autocarros. Ao virar à esquina lembrou-se e olhou para ver se o sem-abrigo estava lá mas o lugar continuava vazio.

Na volta para casa decidiu correr devagar pois estava demasiado frio para caminhar. De repente começou a ouvir uma música que parecia escocesa. Pelo pouco que conhecia, o som vinha daquele instrumento escocês, a gaita. Cada vez mais conseguia ouvir com clareza o som alto que contagiava o ar, orquestrando uma sinfonia que incomodava o frio. Quando ela olhou para ver quem tocava, ficou surpreendida em ver o sem-abrigo. O mesmo homem velho que há semanas tinha desaparecido, voltou de novo e desta vez, trouxe uma gaita para tocar. A noite parecia-lhe surreal e as luzes dos candeeiros conspiravam no odor nocturno.

Durante algum tempo, ela ficou ao pé do homem enquanto ele tocava. Quando finalmente poisou a gaita, ela perguntou-lhe sobre a sua ausência, e este apenas disse que estava a conhecer outros lugares da cidade. Por momentos, pensou que deveria deixá-lo sozinho, já que o velho continuava no silêncio mas estava demasiado curiosa para saber mais sobre a sua vida.

– Onde aprendeu a tocar assim? Perguntou-lhe com uma voz já rouca do frio.

– Há muito tempo, tive um amigo da Escócia que me ofereceu como prenda e me ensinou a tocar, respondeu o homem.

– E sempre traz o instrumento consigo?

– Claro que não. Ainda podem roubá-lo, proclamou. Aliás, já tentaram roubá-lo mas eu não deixei. Prefiri baterem-me do que alguém tirar-me o pouco do que tenho de importante comigo.

– Compreendo, disse ela.

– Só porque eu estou na rua, miserável, já não sou homem, apenas uma parasita como muitos me vêem. Mas a maioria nem sabe da minha vida, quem fui ou o que sou.

– Mas ninguém quer pensar nisso. Eu quando o vi aqui, apenas me despertou curiosidade porque estava a ler um livro. Se não estivesse a ler, o mais provável é que nunca iria aproximar-me e falar consigo.

O homem ficou calado durante algum tempo e depois perguntou-lhe:

– O que queres da vida?

– Como assim?

– Eu perguntei-te o queres fazer, estudar, trabalhar, vaguear...?

– Ah sim, eu já estudei mas claro, ainda tenho de continuar os estudos. Agora trabalho.

– E acreditas em quê?

– Acredito que mais cedo ou mais tarde vou fazer algo melhor do que agora.

– Não é isso que quero saber, declarou num tom irritado. Quando pergunto o queres fazer, é relativamente ao que és. Acreditas em algo? Onde está a tua fé? E não me refiro acreditar em

Deus. Sabes, o que a sociedade hoje precisa não é de mais médicos, professores ou engenheiros. O que a sociedade precisa é de alguém que consiga acreditar, ensinar e fazer as coisas bem. Já vivo na rua há muito tempo e reparo nas pessoas que passam e muitas vezes vejo que dá-se importância a coisas que não têm valor. Advogados e advogadas que se pavoneiam mas depois não percebem nada, professores que saem das aulas sem saberem os nomes dos alunos, atirando ao lixo os seus trabalhos sem sequer lerem o que escreveram. Para mim isso é uma decadência. Ainda falamos da crise económica mas todos parecem tão bem com as suas vidas. Agora vejo que muitos já não frequentam aqueles restaurantes caros. Às vezes ficava por perto e dava-me bom dinheiro. Agora, já não recebo dinheiro mas não me importo. Mas continuo a ver as pessoas a gastarem dinheiro em porcarias.

Depois deste discurso, ela não sabia o que responder mas sabia que ele tinha razão. Mas a razão ou a verdade pouco importam ou talvez importam mais agora do que nunca.

– Sinto-me presa num caos, confessou. Muitos de nós queremos fazer as coisas bem e acreditamos que pudemos, mas não temos muita oportunidade.

– A maioria não é importante, disse ele. O mais importante é encontrar o que te faz acreditar a ti, e isso não depende de muitos. Só depende de ti.

Pensou por momentos e quando ia responder-lhe, o homem começou a tocar e assim despediu-se dele. Talvez iria vê-lo outra vez amanhã, no seu canto, aconchegado à tocar a sua gaita ou à ler um livro. Mas já não iria sentir a mesma monotonia pois só por ter falado com esse homem estranho, viu a monotonia substituída pela beleza desencantada da imprevisibilidade.

Perto de casa, sentiu umas gotas na face e pensou que fosse chuva, mas quando olhou para o céu, viu milhares de gotas a caírem. Estava a nevar. Devagar, caminhou enquanto a neve cobria as ruas, afundando o olhar na escuridão do anoitecer.

The Night It Snowed in Lisbon

Corina Lozovan. Portugal

Cold clashed against the door of the building as she climbed the stairs to her apartment. It was almost night and she had to hurry to do her daily jog in the park. She quickly changed and left. Night had fallen already and the lights from the street lamps spread endlessly. The urban jungle sparkled in the artificial lighting. As she walked towards the park, she looked at shop windows but, instead of seeing the clothes and shoes that invited passers-by to enter the premises, her tired grim eyes saw only herself.

Winter had come late but it was quite cold, settling in and freezing everything in sight. Lisbon was embedded in a melancholy cold and the reflex of people was lost in the mysteries of their lives.

Around a corner, she noticed a homeless man leaning on the door of a building that appeared to belong to some firm. The man was rather snug, wrapped in a blanket and with his back resting on a pillow. But his serene face, as he held a book in his hands, struck her as odd. His eyes appeared to gobble the words, as though they were a plate of hot food. For a moment she considered stopping and talking to him, but she proceeded to the park.

A few months had gone by since she had graduated from college and still no chance of a steady professional occupation. Her current temporary work was too boring and with each new day time seemed to drag more and more, retarding the clocks. But she could not think of her life, not again. While she was running, her thoughts were invaded by countless worries.

Today, running was hard. Nothing appeared to be right. Everything was uncer-

tain. A few days earlier she had spoken with friends who had suggested that she should go abroad, but she did not dare to, not without a safe plan. Perhaps she would find something better if only she tried a little harder. She had neglected to warm up before starting to run, so now she had to go slowly for a while.

The next morning, as she woke up, her arms and legs ached from the lack of warming up. She quickly got ready for a new day. How monotonous everything is, she thought. She closed the door and, as she climbed down the stairs of her building, she said softly to herself: "And I am monotonous too."

At work, her colleagues had lived their monotony for years. Sometimes she was afraid of being held for ever in that tedium and she often asked herself why she had studied for so long. The hours went by monotonously and when her work was done she still had some time to read the news. Sometimes she read a dozen different international newspapers, but only a couple of them carried really well-written articles, with profound analyses. Everything else was news about the bitter conditions of humankind, something she could not get herself to read anymore. On that particular Wednesday she ended up going home early and since it was raining she postponed her jogging to the next day.

In the morning, when she arrived at work, she found a note on her desk. Someone was asking her out. It was Ian, a German fellow who worked in another department.

"What a silly line," she thought, as she threw the note into the paper basket. Later, during coffee break, he came by and asked her again.

“Do you want to have a coffee later?” he asked discreetly.

“I don’t have much time and I already have plans for after work,” she refused politely.

In reality, she had no such plans, but going out with someone was the last thing she really wanted.

“Well, can’t you postpone them?” he insisted.

“Sorry, I really can’t. But thanks anyway,” and she turned her back and got back to work.

After lunch, her colleagues were gossiping and they had already heard that she had turned down the German fellow. One of them approached her and asked: “Do you know Ian said you didn’t want to go out with him because he was German?”

She could only laugh.

“Why would he say something like that?” she asked, still laughing.

“I don’t know, but he said he never felt so discriminated.”

“So, I turned him down and he accuses me of xenophobia,” she said sneering, which left her colleague slightly disturbed.

Every morning, as she entered the firm, she felt as though she was entering a butcher’s. Everybody ogled and inspected everything that went by as though it was a piece of meat. Nobody escaped gossip: either too fat or too thin, a drug addict or a whore, or a drunkard or was cheating on his wife with the secretary from the third floor. Hence, it came as no surprise that her mates were aware of her having dumped the German.

On that day, her jog was a kind of catharsis. After getting so many phone calls and hearing customers complaining, some of them even threatening her pathetically, eliciting nothing but pity, she had almost been tempted to leave early, because she could no longer bear her surroundings. People were sick.

So she simply ran and as she ran she even considered giving up smoking, thinking that if she was this fast being a smoker, she would be much faster and would not get so tired if she stopped. Nevertheless, she enjoyed cigarettes so much during her breaks and, even more, they kept her company when words were no longer enough. It was also that evening that she finally approached the homeless man and talked to him.

“Good evening,” she said in a cordial but perhaps overly forceful tone.

He raised his eyes and said nothing.

“Sorry to bother you,” she insisted, “but I couldn’t help noticing what you were reading.”

She happened to know the book, Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground*. How ironic that someone in such a situation should be reading a book by the Russian author, she thought with a smile.

“Have you read it?” he asked, showing some interest now.

“Yes, I read it a while ago and...”

But he interrupted her, saying: “It’s cruel, but it’s true. Dostoyevsky knew what he was talking about. Everyone should read his books. It would be like seeing themselves in the mirror, only they wouldn’t like what they saw and would end up looking for self-help books.”

The guy is funny, she thought, and added: “Many have perhaps read it but ended up forgetting all about it; sometimes it is best to leave without knowing.”

“Perhaps...” he said slowly. “I pity people who hurry and worry so much, honking in their cars and pretending to be late as though the world will collapse if they don’t get a move on. When the lights turn green, cars are already moving, with no respect for the signals. And I am not even thinking of taxi drivers who look like the Praetorian Guard; they only lack the uniforms! Why such a hurry?”

“Yes,” he added. “And in the underground I see the same thing, crowds that come out and do not step aside, they look like mindless cockroaches, each with a temporary worry only to finish up crushed somewhere.”

The man continued to speak but more softly and he was digressing now. She had to go home and she realized she was thinking about her life once more. Deep down, she did not wish to get old feeling that way. She tried to ask the man why he didn’t look for something better.

“How long have you lived in the street?” she asked suddenly.

“Can’t remember,” he said dryly. “The last time I slept at home I was...” And he stopped sharply.

“Go on,” she said.

“No, this is not a story to be heard. And I don’t want to remember either. Tell me why you go running at this hour, I see you from time to time. You always look angry.”

She was surprised by the man’s comment. She did not actually feel angry, but something close to that, something to do with impatience and frustration.

“Many things like work and worries.” She subtly avoided going into further detail. “I am also very tired; tired of seeing everything standing still, stagnated. Time goes by and I merely go on.”

“Is that so? We don’t have much control over life. But you’re young and you will have plenty of opportunities. All it takes is choosing well. I can’t tell you more than that.”

“Do you mean that all I have to do is to wait and do nothing?” she asked indignantly.

“What do you want to do? I will stay here reading my book and you will carry on with your life.”

That was exactly what she did. She said goodbye to the man and went home. The next day she left earlier for work because she had a headache. Uncertainty accompanied her like a shadow and she felt haunted.

At the weekend she went jogging, but she didn’t see the homeless man, and on Monday she left early on purpose to find out whether he had returned, but no such luck. She ran everyday for the next two weeks, but she never saw him. Eventually she stopped looking; assuming that he probably had found some other place to sleep.

During those weeks, Lisbon had become a mirage for whoever saw it from afar. It looked empty, distant from crowded pavements incessantly trodden during summer. The streets extended towards infinity, winding between the buildings and whispering in the nocturnal loneliness. People walked in silence and even silence stifled itself. She thought that she was not the only one to feel distant. Everything around her seemed voiceless and dry.

She went out to run one evening, but she quickly regretted it. The cold cut through her clothes and infiltrated her skin. She ran slowly until she reached the park. The avenue was deserted, only taxis and buses went by. As she went around a corner she remembered the homeless man and she turned to see if he were there, but the spot was empty.

Returning home she decided to run slowly, as it was too cold to walk. Suddenly she heard music that sounded Scottish. Little as she knew of it, the sound seemed to come from a bagpipe, a typically Scottish instrument. She could hear the loud sound filling the air more and more clearly, like a kind of symphony that interfered with the cold. When she finally spotted the player, she was surprised to see the homeless man, the same old man that had been missing for weeks, there once again and having brought a bagpipe to play. The evening appeared surreal and the lights from the street lamps conspired amidst the nocturnal smells.

She stood by the man for some time while he played. When he finally put the bag-

pipe down, she asked about his absence, but he merely replied that he had been acquainting himself with other parts of the city. For a moment she thought she should leave him alone, since the old man remained silent, but she was too curious to learn more about his life.

“Where did you learn to play like that?” she asked, her voice hoarse from the cold.

“Long ago, a Scottish friend offered this to me as a gift and taught me to play,” he replied.

“And do you always carry it with you?”

“Of course not! Someone could steal it!” he declared. “Actually, someone did try to steal it, but I prevented it. I preferred to get beaten than let what little I have be taken from me.”

“I see,” she said.

“Just because I live in the streets, miserable, no longer a man but a parasite like so many see me, most do not know about my life, who I was or who I am.”

“But nobody wants to think that. When I saw you here, I was simply curious because you were reading a book. If you hadn’t been reading, I would probably never have approached you or talked to you.”

The man remained silent for a while and then he asked: “What do you want from life?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m asking you what you want to do, study, work, wander...”

“Well, I have studied, but I still have to carry on with my studies. At the moment I work.”

“And what do you believe?”

“I believe that sooner or later I’ll do something better than what I am doing now.”

“That’s not what I want to know,” he snapped. “When I ask what you want to do, I mean in relation to what you are. Do you believe in anything? Where is your faith? And I don’t mean believing in God. You know, society doesn’t need more doctors, teachers

or engineers, what it needs is someone who is able to believe, to teach and to do things right. I have been in the streets for a long time and I notice passers-by and often I see that valueless things are given importance. I see strutting lawyers who know nothing at all, teachers who come out of their classes without knowing their pupils’ names, throwing their assignments into the rubbish without even reading what they have written. That’s decadence for me. There is talk of economic crisis, but everybody seems content with their lives. Many no longer go to those fancy restaurants; I used to hang around outside and get good money, but not anymore and I don’t care. But I still see people spending their money buying rubbish.”

After such a speech she didn’t know what to say, but she knew he was right. However, right or truth mean little or perhaps they mean more now than ever.

“I feel imprisoned in chaos,” she confessed. “Many of us want to do the right thing and we believe we can, but we get no chances.”

“The majority is not important,” he said. “The important thing is finding whatever makes you believe and that has nothing to do with the majority, it only depends on you.”

She thought for a moment and as she was about to answer the man started playing again, so she said goodbye. Perhaps she would see him again the next day, in his corner, snugly playing his bagpipes or reading his book. But she would no longer feel the same monotony, because the mere fact of having spoken with that strange man had replaced it with the disenchanted beauty of unpredictability.

Near home she felt a few drops on her face and thought it was rain, but as she looked up to the sky she saw thousands of similar drops falling. It was snowing. She walked slowly as the snow covered the streets, gazing deeply into the evening darkness.

Berači Bresaka

Dragana Tripković. Crna Gora

Već neko vrijeme Kosta spava u radničkom bungalovu na plantaži. Još uvijek od branja bresaka nije imao dovoljno novca da iznajmi sobu u gradu. To mu inače ne pričinjava preveliki problem, osim u noćima kad mu tijelo drhti od žmaraca umora, pa ne može tako lako da zaspi. Tada ga svako malo budi hrkanje, prdeži ili buncanja četvorice radnika, jednog iz Makedonije i ostalih iz Srbije, koji spavaju sa njim u bungalovu na plantaži. Na plantaži bresaka, najvećoj u Evropi, Kosta radi već dvije nedjelje. Za sada je zaradio 120 eura, što je, kako mu kažu stariji radnici, odlično, zato što ne izgleda kao radnik, nego kao neki naučnik. Važno je nabrati najmanje 50 gajbi dnevno, da bi na kraju mjeseca mogao da računa na neki pristojan novac. Smještaj u bungalovu je prilično jeftin i odbija mu se od mjesečne zarade. Na ovom dijelu plantaže ima šest bungalova i svi su skoro popunjeni.

Jutra na plantaži su istinski lijepa. Mnogo su drugačija nego kod njega na Sjeveru. Tamo nema ničega. Tamo je njegova mrtva baba koja ga je odgajila kad je ostao sam. Ovdje je toplo, ali to mu ne smeta. Pogled koji se pruža iz bungalova na dugačke, simetrične redove stabala bresaka, otvara prizor pun ljetnjih boja i slatkastog mirisa koji se miješa sa mirisom skvašene paljevine. To, vjerovatno izjutra trava spržena dnevnim suncem, izdiše nakon uobičajenog navodnjavanja plantaže. Kosta tada zamišlja da je plantaža njegova i da su bungalovi njegova privatna hacijenda, gdje se ljeti odmara, dok neki fini ali neobrazovani ljudi koje on ipak dobro plaća, rade za njega. Sve dok ne krene na posao.

Radnici svakog jutra ustaju u četiri sata. Tada se traktorima dovoze do zbornog mjesta pored ogromnog crveno-sivog hidrofora, gdje im se dodjeljuju gajbe i gdje se raspoređuju u redove. Ko hoće, može dobiti rukavice, mada se u rukavicama ruke oznoje i zapare, i bude teže nego bez njih. Na tom mjestu, radnici iz bungalova susreću se sa onima koji izjutra dolaze iz svojih stanova u gradu ili iz drugih gradova, drugih država. Branje bresaka je jednostavan posao.

– Ove malo ružnije i sitnije, stavljate na dno gajbe. Peteljka dolje, guzica gore! Neka odozgo budu lijepe i krupne. Ako je neka prezrela, bacite je u kanal. Dok berete, nemojte ih jesti prije nego ih operete. Ima dovoljno, ne bojte se, nećete gladni ostati. Dobro je da imate neku bijelu krpu ili kapu dok radite – objašnjava šef smjene novim radnicima.

Kosta voli breskve, ali od kad radi na plantaži, nije probao ni jednu. Valjda mu se od tog obilja ne čine previše ukusnima. Svako izobilje gubi vrijednost i ustupa mjesto onome čega malo ima, pa makar realna vrijednost tog nedostatka bila mala. Kao na primjer neuzvrata ljubav.

– Ručak je u 12 sati – kaže šef smjene. Neki radnici jedu breskve uz ručak.

Uz konzervu prerađevine od mesa, goste se breskvama, hljebom i sirom. Breskve su dobre za probavu. Nekad i previše dobre. Večera je u pet, za one koji spavaju na plantaži. Berba počinje u pet.

Među novim radnicima stigla je i četvoročlana porodica. Porodično branje je kažu, isplativije. Porodica uz dobru organizaciju dnevno može nabrati i po 200 gajbi.

Četvoročlanu porodicu čine majka, otac, brat i Julija. Julija je u teksas šortsu, ručno prepravljenom od nekadašnjih farmerki, i bordo trikmajici. Nerviraju je bubice koje joj napadaju

noge iz rijetke trave blizu redova stabala bresaka. Već se dva-tri puta počela histerično, kako samo žene umiju. Nakon raspodjele gajbi, porodica se odlučila za prva dva reda u ovom dijelu plantaže. Majka i otac su krenuli od prvog reda, a Julija i brat su zauzeli drugi. Kosta je krenuo od trećeg reda.

Jutro treba iskoristiti što je više moguće, dok još uvijek zemlja odiše vlagom, tada su grane sa breskvama nježne i meke, kao pospane. Kosti je uvijek bilo žao da čupa plodove, kako to rade ostali berači, ne bi li što brže i što više ubrali. Za dvije nedjelje, možda mu se svega par puta desilo da zajedno sa plodom iščupa grančicu na kojoj je rastao. I tada, jer mu je pala koncentracija, jer je moguće, slabo spavao te noći. On zna da će sve te grane posjeći kad prođe berba, da bi dogodine izrasle nove, ali ih je ipak doživljavao kao bića sa nekom sviješću, kojima treba dozvoliti što duže da žive, pa makar i bez plodova. Procijenio je da je svejedno kojim tempom bereš, čovjek teško da za dan može izbaciti preko 70 gajbi. Čak i ako možeš, sutradan si nizašta. Kada prođe devet sati, podgoričko sunce počne jače da prži. Čuje se galama zrikavaca i po neki veseljak iz susjednih redova koji na jednom od jezika i dijalekata južnoslovenskih naroda verbalno označava teritoriju, isto kao kad pas zapišava svoju. Kosta ne komunicira gotovo ni sa kim, osim sa onima koji mu se sami nametnu. Nakon deset sati ujutru, zemlja postane tvrda i suva. Ispucali zemljani komadi liče na male kontinente silom razdvojene, o koje se berači spotiču u toku svog plesa sa breskvama.

Julija i brat zaostaju za Kostom. Breskvino stablo nije visoko i njegovi plodovi su dostupni visini čovjeka južnjačke građe. Ipak, Juliji je nekad potrebna gajba na koju se popne da bi dohvatila najudaljenije plodove, jer je njen mlađi brat niži od nje. Njih dvoje ne razgovaraju puno. Samo osnovne stvari. Brat je nervozan i nerado prihvata stid svog posla. Drugačije će se osjećati kada primi novac, ali njegov stav sada odaje pubertetliju koji nije želio ovakvu sudbinu. Otac i majka su daleko odmakli. Njihov sistem je uigran. Tako oni misle.

Sunce u nekom trenutku između deset i 12 sati počne zauzimati radikalni stav. Čovjek zaboravi na vrijeme i počne kolektivno iščekivanje kraja, nekog volšebnog kraja, ne više ni kraja reda sa zasadima bresaka, ni kraja radnog vremena, ni kraja dana, već nekog novog, sasvim subjektivnog kraja, gdje prestaju sve muke i gdje sve postaje istopljeno i mlako, kao u kaši. Majka djeci s vremena na vrijeme dobacuje.

– Još malo, još malo – pri čemu Julija i brat odlično vide koliko je preostalo.

Majku su graške znoja prekrivale po licu, a odjeća joj se lijepila za kožu, strahovito precizno ocrtavajući konture ženskog tijela, neumornog, nezasluženo ignorisanog. Ona ne mrzi svog čovjeka koji je njihovu srednju klasu doveo na plantažu bresaka, jer zna da nije kriv on. Ona pokazuje da ima moć nad vremenom koje joj podgoričko julsko sunce nepobitno topi u beskrajnim redovima državnih bresaka. Znoj zna da peče, kao rana osoljena morskom vodom i sasušena suncem. Tako pore nježne kože reaguju nenaviknute na tretman radnika.

Radnici su počeli da izlaze iz redova i da se okupljaju na istom mjestu odakle su počeli sa radom. Hladnjača je dopremila ručak. Napajanje vodom je skoro ritualno, a radnici se za ručak grupišu po nepisanim pravilima, svako u svoju grupu. Grupe su uglavnom nacionalne ili one po stažu na plantaži. Svako bira svoj hlad. Kosta je jeo pored Julijine porodice.

– Ukupno 60. Ako uspijemo još toliko do kraja dana, biće u redu za prvi put – rekao je otac.

– Ma i više od toga – dodala je ohrabrujuće majka.

Šef smjene je oko jedan sat počeo da poziva radnike na vraćanje u redove. To je najteži trenutak u toku dana.

Kosta je htio da se u jednom trenutku upusti u razgovor sa porodicom, ali mu je djelovalo kao da će im komunikacija sa bilo kim otežati muku. Samo ih je mirno posmatrao, nadajući se da će im njegovo prećutno razumijevanje uliti hrabrost. Ponovo su uskočili u redove. Žuta neprijateljska kugla iznad njih je umirila plantažu. Nije se čula ni riječ. Julija i brat su nastavili u istom redu, ne došavši ni do pola.

– Ne mogu više – rekla je Julija nakon novih sat vremena i sjela ispod breskvinog stabla, skupljajući noge u koljena, ne umorna, nego skrhkana. Brat je gledao nepomičan, sa dopola praznom gajbom pored nogu. Nije progovorio ni riječ. Kosta se provukao kroz drvored bresaka i došao do njih.

– Je li ti dobro?

Julija je naglo ustala i nastavila da bere. Sada je to radila brže i energičnije nego kad je došla. Brat je jedva stizao da pakuje plodove. Kao da je bila nošena novom energijom, koncentrisana samo na mehaniku ruku u odnosu na grane, ignorišući bijedu svog položaja, na njenom zajapurenom licu sada je titrao ponos.

Sunce u pet sati nije ništa slabije nego u dva ili u tri. Samo se tako kaže. Traktor koji odvođi radnike, parkirao se na poziciju. Ljudi su u kolonama išli ka njemu napuštajući pravilne redove sa plantaža.

Kosta je krenuo ka bungalovu sa ostalim ljudima. Jeftin sapun i mlaka voda povratili su mu tijelo. Bio je slobodan da osmisli ostatak dana, ali njegov dan se razlikovao od dana ljudi koji ne rade na plantažama. Pomislio je da bi trebalo nekome da se javi kući, ali nije imao kome. Ova ga misao i nije previše zamarala, bio je naviknut na nju. Došla je više kao prirodni incident, nego kao potreba. Nije mislio na porodicu, nego na Juliju.

Sjutradan je Julija došla sama na plantažu.

– Gdje su ti ostali – pitao je Kosta, pimijetivši da ga je Julija pogledala onim pogledom kojim se gledaju ljudi sa kojim želiš da se upoznaš.

– Odustali su. Ubrali smo ukupno 85 gajbi, svo četvoro. Ja ću nastaviti sama.

– Hrabra si – primijetio je Kosta. – Hoćeš li da zajedno beremo? Više ćemo tako.

– Može – odgovorila je hitro.

Kosta i Julija u istom redu, nizali su ljetnje plodove, potpuno drugačije nego što su to pojedinačno radili juče, ili u njegovom slučaju, drugačije nego ikad. Juliju je prije svega na plantažu vratio ponos, zaključio je Kosta. Ona je mlada, hrabra žena, njene nježne ruke blago stišču breskve, pažljivo, isto kao on, brinući da drvetu ostane njegovo. Za čovjeka je plod sasvim dovoljan, i Julija je to shvatala. On je brao one visočije, a njoj su pripadali dohvatljivi primjerci biljke. U neobičnom skladu, bez previše razmijenjenih pogleda, ruke su pratile radnju i njih dvoje su odmakli za kratko vrijeme do samog kraja reda. Bio je to svojevrsni rekord. Kosta je primijetio i da je sunce danas nekako slabijeg inteziteta. Na kraju plantaže nije bilo ničega, samo podnožje niskog brda i parče neupotrebljive zemlje. Brdo i njegovo divlje rastinje bacali su malu sjenku na njihov dio plantaže. Sjeli su pored rupe, koju je okruživalo kamenje. Kosta je skinuo košulju i raširio preko zemlje, ne bi li sunce upilo znoj. Rupa pored koje su bili imala je oblik velike fotelje. Kosta je razbacao kamenje naokolo kako bi proširio prostor. Zemlja je unutra bila hladna i meka i dok su se smjestili ugodaj je pričinjavao neopisivo zadovoljstvo u trenutku kad za to ne postoji logika.

Sljedećeg dana donijeli su flašu sa vodom, hljeb i konzerve, i ručali u rupi. Rupa je sad već bila veća. Drvenim djelovima gajbi, širili su unutrašnjost svog skloništa. Kada su htjeli da na-

stave sa berbom, pobacali bi polomljene gajbe i grane breskvinog drveta preko rupe, kako im je slučajno neki radnik ne bi zauzeo. Svakog dana su ručali u rupi. Radnici na plantaži su se često smjenjivali tako da uglavnom nije bilo moguće primijetiti da neko fali. Kada bi Kosta i Julija vidjeli da hladnjača sa ručkom odlazi, znali su da to označava kraj pauze i izlazak iz rupe. U rupi je postalo toliko ugodno, da su sljedećeg puta donijeli staro vojničko ćebe, kako bi obložili prostor u kojem odmaraju. Rupa je pružala hlad, spokoj i slobodan prostor za njih dvoje koji ne pripadaju onima tamo. Rupa je počela da se širi i postaje veća. Sada je u nju moglo da stane i par malih jastuka, Julija je donijela dva normalna tanjira od kuće, kako ne bi više morali jesti iz konzervi, pribor, dvije staklene čaše i peškir. Dani su prolazili, a Kosta bi se katkad smijao njihovom pronalasku i bio srećan što je plantaža bresaka konačno njegova hacijenda u kojoj se odmara. I to sa jednom predivnom ženom. Julija bi svakog dana protresla ćebe i jastuke u slučaju da su ih tokom noći zaposjele neke bube, i radost pauze je mogla da počne. Jednog dana su tako oboje zaspali u rupi. Probudili su se na kraju radnog vremena, čuvši buku traktora koji odvozi radnike. Nije bilo bitno što nijesu ispunili beračku kvotu za taj dan jer su zajedno, prilično dobro radili. Bilo im je po malo neugodno od pogleda ostalih radnika. Vjerovatno su mislili ko zna šta, ali isto tako osjećali su zadovoljstvo svojim tajnim, povlašćenim položajem. Kosta nije ni pomišljao da se preseli u grad iako je sad već imao dovoljno novca da iznajmi sobu. Sigurnost rupe mu se činila važnijom, a za grad će biti vremena kad prođe berba. Svako jutro je s slatkom srećom čekao dolazak traktora sa radnicima koji je dovezio Juliju.

Traktor je dovezio sve ostale radnike osim Julije.

Peach Pickers

Dragana Tripković. Montenegro

Kosta has already been asleep for some time in the workers' bungalow on the plantation. As a peach picker, he has not yet made enough money to rent a room in the city. That is usually not a huge problem for him, except during those nights when his body shivers with pins and needles from tiredness, and he finds it difficult to fall asleep. Every now and then he is awoken by snoring, farts or the ravings of the other four workers who sleep in the same bungalow, one of them from Macedonia and the others from Serbia.

Kosta has been working at the plantation, the biggest one in Europe, for two weeks now. He has already earned 120 euros, which is great for him, as the older workers told him he looked more like a scientist than a worker. It is important to fill at least 50 crates a day in order to make a decent amount of money at the end of the month. Accommodation in the bungalow is quite cheap and it is deducted from his monthly wage. There are six bungalows in this part of the plantation and almost all of them have been filled.

Mornings at the plantation are really beautiful. They are rather different here than at his place, in the north. There is nothing there except his dead grandmother who raised him after he was abandoned. It is hot here, but it does not bother him. The view from the bungalows of the long, symmetrical lines of peach trees sets the scenery full of summer colours and a sweetish smell, which is mixed with the waft of humid burning. It is probably the grass, scorched by the sunlight, evaporating in the morning, after the plantation has been regularly irrigated. It is then that Kosta imagines that the plantation is his

own property, with the bungalows as his private hacienda where he rests in the summer, while some fine uneducated, yet well-paid, workers labour for him. He holds on to this image until he starts work.

Every morning workers get up at four o'clock. Afterwards, they are transported by tractors to the meeting place, next to the enormous red-grey hydraulic accumulator, where they are given crates and then positioned in the lines of trees. You can get a pair of gloves if you like, but then your hands become sweaty, making it more difficult to work. At this point, workers from the bungalows meet up with those who come every morning from their city flats, or from other cities or states. Picking peaches is a simple job.

"The smaller uglier ones go at the bottom of the crate. The stem is turned down, the bum up! Place the nice big ones on top. If you find an overripe one, throw it in the canal. Don't eat them unwashed while you're picking. There are more than enough, so don't worry, you won't starve. It's good to have a white cloth or a cap while you are working," the acting chief officer explains to the newcomers.

Kosta likes peaches, but since he has started working in the plantation, he has not eaten any. Maybe such a large quantity makes them less tasty. All abundance loses its value and gives up its place to something less abundant, even if the real value of the shortage is insignificant, such as unrequited love.

"Lunch is at twelve o'clock," the acting chief says.

Some workers eat peaches with their lunch. They treat themselves to peaches, bread

and cheese along with a tin of meat products. Peaches are good for digestion, sometimes even too good. Dinner is at five, for those who sleep on the plantation. Picking starts at five in the morning.

A family of four has arrived among the new workers. Family picking is said to be more profitable. A well-organized family can pick up to 200 crates a day.

The family of four includes a mother, father, brother and Julija. Julija is wearing denim shorts, made out of an old pair of jeans, and a dark-red T-shirt. She is annoyed by the insects, attacking her legs from sparse grass, near the rows of peach trees. She has already scratched herself a few times, as nervously as only women can. After the distribution of the crates, the family decide to take up the first two lines in this part of the plantation. The mother and father start from the first row and Julija and her brother take the second. Kosta begins from the third row.

One should take advantage of the morning as much as possible here, while the soil still smells of moisture, when branches with peaches are tender and soft, as if asleep. Kosta has always been very careful not to pluck fruits, as other workers do, in order to be faster and pick more. For the last two weeks he might have tugged at a tree bough along with its fruit, but only a few times. Even then, it happened because he was not focused enough, as he probably hadn't slept well that night. He knows that all these branches will be cut off when picking is over, so that new ones can come up next year, but he still thinks of them as beings with some kind of consciousness, which should be allowed to live longer, even without fruit. He has estimated that no matter how fast you pick, it is almost impossible to fill more than 70 crates a day. Even if you can do better, you are useless the next day. After nine o'clock the sun in Podgorica starts burning your skin more.

You can hear the sound of crickets as well as the noise made by one of the merry fellows from the next row in one of the southern Slavic languages and dialects, thus verbally marking the territory, in the same way as a dog marks its own by urinating. Kosta communicates with hardly anyone, except those who impose on him. After ten o'clock in the morning the land becomes tough and dry. Cracked sections of the earth look like small continents separated by force, with the pickers stumbling over them during their dance among the peaches.

Julija and her brother have lagged behind Kosta. A peach tree is not very high and its fruits are within the reach of an averagely tall man from the South. Julija still sometimes needs a crate to climb on, so that she can reach the highest fruits, because her younger brother is smaller than she is. The two of them do not talk much, just basic conversation. Her brother is nervous and reluctant to accept the shame of his job. His feelings will be different when he receives money, but his current attitude reveals an immature boy in puberty who does not want such a destiny. Their mother and father have moved far away, leaving them behind. Their working system is well coordinated. At least they think so.

At one moment between ten and twelve o'clock the sun assumes an extreme, radical posture. You forget about the time and there comes a collective waiting for the end, some mysterious ending, which is not particularly connected with the end of the row of planted peach trees, or the end of working time, or the end of the day, but some new, completely subjective ending where all troubles end and everything becomes melted and warm, like porridge.

From time to time the mother calls out to her children. "Just a little bit more, a little more," while Julija and her brother are perfectly aware of how much they have left to do.

Drops of sweat cover the mother's face, and her clothes are sticking to her skin, vividly outlining precise contours of her female body, tireless and undeservingly ignored. She does not hate her man, who has brought their middle-class family to the plantation, as she knows it is not his fault. She shows that she has power over time, which has been diminishing in the endless lines of the state-owned peach trees, under the July sun in Podgorica. The sweat can burn, like a wound salted by seawater and dried by the sun. This is the reaction of her delicate skin pores, unaccustomed to the worker's lot.

The workers start coming out of the lines, gathering together at the same place they started working. A refrigerated truck has brought the lunch. Providing water is almost a ritual and at lunchtime the workers group together according to unwritten rules. The groups are mostly formed on the basis of nationality, or in line with the length of service at the plantation. Everyone chooses his own shaded spot. Kosta has his lunch next to Julija's family.

"Sixty in total. If we manage to pick the same amount during the rest of the day, it will be a good result for the first time," says the father.

"It will be more than enough," adds the mother, encouragingly.

The acting chief calls the workers to go back to the lines around one o'clock. It is the hardest moment of the day.

Kosta wants to start a conversation with the family at one point, but it seems as if any kind of communication would only add to their trouble. He just observes them, hoping that his tacit understanding will instil courage in them. They move into the lines again. The yellow, enemy ball above them calms the plantation. Not a single word can be heard. Julija and her brother continue working in the same line, without finishing half of it.

"I can't do it any longer," says Julija after an hour and she sits under the peach tree, bending her knees, not because she is tired, but more to crash out. Her brother is staring at her, motionless, with a half-empty crate next to his feet. He doesn't say a word. Kosta moves through a tree-lined path and goes to them.

"Are you alright?"

Julija suddenly stands up and continues her work. She is now picking faster and more energetically than when she came. Her brother can barely manage to pack the picked fruits. She looks as if she is working with new enthusiasm and energy, concentrating only on the mechanical movements of her hands in relation to the branches, ignoring the awkwardness of her posture, with a flicker of pride on her blushed face.

The five o'clock sun does not become less hot than at two or three, contrary to what people say. The tractor, which takes the workers back, is parked at its starting position. Columns of workers start moving towards it, leaving behind straight rows of trees.

Kosta heads for his bungalow together with the other workers. His body is revived by cheap soap and lukewarm water. He is free to plan the rest of the day, but his day is different from the regular days of those people who do not work at the plantation. He thinks he should call home, but then he has no one to call. This thought does not bother him much, he is used to it. He does not think of his family, he thinks of Julija.

The next morning, Julija comes to the plantation alone.

"Where are the others," Kosta asks, as he notices her look, the one you give to people you want to meet.

"They quit. We picked 85 crates in total, all four of us. I'll keep working on my own."

"You are brave," Kosta comments. "Would you like to pick with me? We'll manage more together."

“OK,” she quickly replies.

Standing in the same row, Kosta and Julija are picking the fruits together in a completely differently way from how they had done it individually the day before, or in his case, differently from ever before. After all, her pride has brought her back to the plantation, Kosta concludes. She is a brave young woman. Her hands clasp the peaches gently, carefully, as he himself is doing, taking care of the tree, leaving behind everything that belongs to it. One fruit is quite enough for a man, and Julija knows that. He is picking the ones on the higher branches, while those at arm’s length belong to her. Unusually coordinated, without exchanging too many glances, their hands are in unison, and the two of them progress to the end of the row in a short time. It is a kind of a special record. Kosta notices that even the sunshine is somehow less intense today. There is nothing at the end of the plantation, just a foothill of the low mountain and a piece of useless land. The mountain and its wild vegetation cast a small shadow over their part of the plantation.

They sit next to a hole, surrounded by stones. Kosta takes off his shirt and spreads it over the ground, so that the sun can absorb the sweat. The hole they are sitting beside is shaped like an armchair. Kosta scatters the stones around in order to expand the inner space. The ground in the hole is cold and soft and, without any logical explanation, the experience of settling down causes a feeling of unbelievable pleasure at that moment.

The next day they bring a bottle of water, some bread and a few tins and they have lunch inside the hole. It is wider now. They have enlarged the inner part of their shelter using wooden parts from the crates. When they want to get back to work, they fill the hole with broken crates and peach tree branches, so that no one can find it by chance. They have lunch there every day. Workers at

the plantation are replaced every now and then, so it is impossible to notice if someone is missing. When Kosta and Julija see a refrigerated truck leaving the plantation, they know it means the break is over and time to leave the hole. It has become so comfortable in the hole that they take an old military blanket to cover their resting place. The hole provides shade, peace and free space for these two who do not belong with the other workers. The hole starts expanding, becoming wider and deeper. There is a space for a few small cushions in it, and Julija brings two plates from home so they will not have to eat directly from the tin, as well as utensils, two glasses and a towel.

The days pass by. Kosta sometimes laughs at their invention and is happy that the peach plantation has finally turned into his own hacienda where he is spending his holiday. And he is doing it with a wonderful woman. Julija shakes out the blanket and the cushions in case they have been invaded by bugs overnight, and after that the joy of their break time can begin.

One day they both fall asleep in the hole. They are woken up at the end of the shift by the noise of the tractor, taking the workers back home. They work pretty well together, so it does not matter they have not fulfilled the quota for the day. They are embarrassed a little by the looks of the other workers. Whatever they think of them, their secret, privileged position gives them a real pleasure. Kosta does not even think about moving to the city, although he has already earned enough money to rent a room. The security of the hole seems to be more important, and he will have enough time for the city after the end of picking season.

Feeling the sweet taste of fortune, every morning he still waits for the tractor which used to bring Julija to him. But now the tractor brings all the workers except Julija.

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