

The Thankless Stranger

Irena Brežná

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My name no longer belonged to me. People pronounced it with a stutter; it sounded wrong, awkward. A constant reminder that I was unwelcome. And my speech in the new language was suspiciously jagged. I'd trip up, as a hole opened up before me. The locals wanted smooth interactions, with all potholes tarmacked over. My teacher would coax me, "You need to adapt. Imagine walking down the street and everyone thinking you're from here."

But I knew: my flat moon face would give me away. And so what? I didn't want to stretch it into their shape and put down roots like a grain of wheat.

The fields were fragmented by electric fences, cows grazing behind "Private – Keep Out" signs. Back home, we had wide-open fields stretching on forever until no man's land. Here, the ponds didn't belong to us all; even the fish were privately owned. Where was there beyond all the Keep Outs, to run free into the sunset and scream and scream until I dropped? Emotions that broke free of their containment were treated with suspicion, as though you were somehow expropriating private property. Remember the fairytale about the magic porridge pot, which overflowed until the porridge spilled over the kitchen floor, then out of the house, flowing on and on across the countryside? Well, nobody had heard of it here. The locals preferred horror stories about our evil regime of injustice, which made their eyes turn soft and velvety. They would have liked to give me a hug, but that's frowned upon too. The body is private territory behind an invisible iron curtain.

"You need to get a licence here before you're even allowed to stroke someone on the cheek," Mara said.

I wanted to release them from their curse, but whenever I tried to approach someone, they would freeze up.

"How terrible life's been to you, you poor thing. You'll be fine now that you're here," and they'd offer a farewell handshake.

There was no spin cycle I could jump into to wash my old self clean and start an immaculate new life. I was supposed to be grateful to be able to live here. And always punctual. Who was I supposed to be punctually grateful to, when everything in this much better world was going so badly? Home is where you can have a good rant and let off steam; but I didn't have a home.

Early in the morning before school, I used to deliver newspapers, tossing them at the villa doors, humming to the rattle of the cart, to the beat of my first job. I was supposed to bend down, lay the newspaper on the doorstep carefully, tread gently and dress inoffensively. I was, after all, on the lowest rung of the social ladder and people's roles were not to be confused: they had developed here over centuries and had stood the test of time, the boss warned me. He himself laughed at his unrevolutionary words and said it was a pity, but it was the way of the world. Yet I carried on walking boldly upright at dawn behind the little cart, with my hair loose, while the residents' complaints about me stacked up on the boss's desk.

"Either you tie your hair up or I'm going to have to let you go."

I remained untied-up. I wanted my hair to flow freely, my thick curls spreading over my shoulders. I would comb it in the morning by the window, hoping to attract admiring looks. But instead, someone collected a mass of my hair in the yard below, wrapped the missive in toilet paper and posted it into our letter box. It wasn't a matter of property, just filth which was to be flushed away down the toilet. And not a single word in there with it. The light package spoke for itself; the message weighed heavily. It was oppressively quiet and the neatly tied rubbish sacks glistened black. I imagined myself being disposed of in one of them. Even lush, freshly fallen leaves were considered filth. Noisy vacuum cleaners swept around zealously sucking up their familiar rustling.

In a permanent state of vulnerability, I was prone above all to crying; tears fell at every stumble. The action of a single person would knock me flying. All I wanted was to escape from this perfectly kempt vacuum, where I was constantly being told off, and get back to the pavements of my home town, strewn with rubbish. Home was where there were familiar signs of life. In this foreignness, what was once a stench now became the fragrant aroma of home and freedom.

I can tell from her pale and saggy appearance that the young woman has already spent weeks in prison. Her motionless body rages with thoughts. She has attacks of trembling, and her small blue eyes glisten like a puddle at the bottom of a well. They have cried all that they can. She doesn't understand her

crime; her thoughts keep hitting a brick wall. She says that she used to clean other people's houses morning to night and has always been hardworking and obedient. When her friend asked her to take some packages to another country, she did it out of the goodness of her heart. Bending forward, she wrings her hands as if trying again to empty her heart. She didn't get any money for it; she had just been glad to help. She could never turn anybody down, especially not him, after he had been so good to her.

As a child she had known destitution, and this man had helped her get out and would buy her exactly the jeans she wanted, without ever looking at the price. She had never met anyone like that, a man with culture, yet very reserved. She found him hard to make sense of. When fifteen policemen stormed the flat three months ago, that was when she realised that she was the fiancée of a drug baron. They aimed their guns at her, ready to fire, while he had already fled over the mountains. She's sitting on the plain defendant's chair, her hands sweating as she rubs them together.

"I'm here to help you. Just say what you need."

She's offering herself to the judge, but he doesn't want anything from her. He remands her for eight more weeks in custody, pending investigation.

The policewoman places handcuffs on her and the lawyer asks, "How are things in prison?"

The detainee grimaces.

"I won't have anything to do with the other woman, the murderer. And what is there to do? Watch TV or watch TV."

"Do you still love your boyfriend?"

She shakes her head, slightly too quickly.

"Thanks to him I've lost everything: the flat, my cleaning job – even if it was illegal and badly paid – and now I'm afraid of his revenge."

She curls herself up protectively.

The lawyer says pensively, "There's not a single woman I've ever represented who's acted on her own. Behind every female offender there's a man pulling the strings."

"Being weak is also a crime," I say. "Not rebelling, not finding the strength to change sides, remaining ignorant and obedient out of comfort and fear, not being able to get away from the wrong people. I suppose it's a question of self-confidence."

The man is from an area that I know well. We exchange a few names of local people and places, as though we're at a family reunion. I am quickly swept along by the current of familiarity, gesticulating wildly, forgetting that in this country the language of the hands suggests non-conformity and lack of control.

The lawyer tries to drag me out from the whirlpool back onto his raft: his body stiffens, he speaks in chopped sentences, legal terminology stacked back to back like a row of planks. But the more walls and rules there are, the more I want to be free. The prison is a filthy cloister that gives rise to unhinged hopes. The path so far taken by the offender is clear to see. The question is, will there be a U-turn? May light be cast upon this hour, 'which we spend here because of what he's done, and upon this room that gets no daylight. That's why I'm here, and interpreting is only a pretext.

"I've got some news for you – it's not too bad," says the lawyer in the understated manner so beloved of the locals. "You're to be released."

The prisoner gradually sits up from his cowering position, uncurls his clenched fingers, and deftly slips the lawyer's business card into his sock as two wardens come into the room. The swiftness of his actions suggests that he's at home behind bars. He praises the prison food: schnitzel on a Sunday and ice cream for pudding. Besides, people treat him with respect and he has everything he needs. Of course, sometimes he feels like lashing out, but against what? In custody everything's made of cotton wool; he's relieved of every decision. As we leave, he stands up straight and looks at us as if deeply moved, with his hand on his heart, as though it were his mother and father forsaking him.

"Is the man innocent?" I ask the lawyer.

"A dozen or so offences across the continent have been pinned on him, but they can't prove anything."

A warden in a light-blue uniform marches with a broad, military gait down the long corridor and brings me and the lawyer back to the prison's receptionist. She wishes us a nice day, like a tour guide bidding her guests farewell as they disembark after a Sunday boat trip.

The locals approached conversation as if they worked at an information desk: "When did you get here? Where do you live? Where are you going to and when?"

Some knew entire train and bus timetables off by heart. I was quickly written off as unreliable, unable even to remember the opening hours of the immigration police. Back home, no one even knew when we'd arrived or where we were going. We frittered away the time with idle chatter. Whenever I tried to be the charming joker, I was met with raised eyebrows. How frivolous to be not only ambiguous but light-hearted, too. The teacher explained to us the correct way of making conversation: "Outline what you plan to say and how long you intend to speak for, and don't forget to mention your aim. That way the person listening to you will feel more certain." For

me, the only certain thing was the tedium of it all. The teacher demonstrated by explaining at length what he intended to cover in the lesson, before going on to carry out his intention item by item. I longed for surprises, and was in love with the word itself – *Überraschung* – which tumbled off your tongue, *überrasch* – all too fast – exactly how I imagined surprises popping up and bursting in on the lesson.

Of course, the teacher excluded the possibility of anything unexpected: “That was not part of the plan.”

As I gazed into the distance, my speech, short on the finer details, was loose and unhinged. “Just a moment. Everything in the right order,” he would interrupt me, channelling my torrent into manageable rivulets. Then, satisfied, he said he could understand me better.

I would rush to parties, hoping to gorge myself on the sociable atmosphere. But a party was in fact a seamless continuation of work. The guests were informed in writing both of the start time and desired end time. Conversation revolved around building permits, civil court presidential elections and rising medical insurance fees, while Klärli, Freneli and Marlisi would just stand around silently like forgotten umbrellas – after all, grammatically speaking, women were just neutral objects. I hadn’t come here to hold my tongue. The other guests were tolerant enough to grant me limited freedom to speak, but rather than simply admiring my stories, they would hack them apart with practical solutions. They wanted to heal the world, whereas I just wanted to tell it.

If an uninvited guest arrived, it was referred to as an invasion. Such war plans were really supposed to be announced in advance: “I’m planning to descend on you in three weeks’ time” is how people tended to threaten a visit. Other methods of ambush were unheard of. With increasing tension the hosts ensured their requirements were complied with. Even children’s parties had a pre-discussed structure which was patiently drilled into the little guests so that they would know what to expect. To survive such an over-planned party demanded a lot of stamina on the part of the guests. Neither was it all over when the visitors dispersed. Only now was exuberance permitted: from a safe distance, concealed in an envelope, they sent pre-printed thank you cards gushing with exclamation marks.

Without the slightest clue of what the following day would bring, I was unable to participate in the local passion for weather-related riddles. What would the temperature be in the mountains or at the bottom of the factory chimney on the north west side of town? Would the forecast turn out to be right? The umbrella was always ready at the door, just in case. I would talk of weather I remembered, where your skin would be drenched to the bone or warmed in an

intimately physical way. But here, there were no surprises: the sun had its fixed schedule just like any tax inspector. The rain came on time, precisely as predicted, as punctually as the post. The postman's early visit was as reliable as the weatherman. Missives good and bad passed through his hands, but this popular hero would never succumb to the temptation to tear open a thick package like the heavens are torn apart by a thunderstorm. Invoices didn't burst into flame en route and no one ran off with cash deposits. Discipline, for which the country had sacrificed centuries, was a tangible benefit. It was just a shame that neither the conductors nor the postmen were trained to exchange a few spare, non-functional words in passing.

But telling stories wasn't the locals' strong suit in any case. Talented storytellers don't stick so closely to the facts. And what tragedies were there to recall, anyway? In the year of the revolution a few people showed solidarity by occupying a tram line, showing inconsiderate disdain towards the workers who then had to hurry to the office on foot. Did they then proudly relate the blockade of public transport? No. Would they wax lyrical about the injured and the dead? No. They didn't exaggerate and the truth was never sacrificed to the punchline. They could be relied on for that. And when did they ever fail to be reliable? They never leant on anyone but themselves, not even in love. This was explicitly decreed on the trains in four languages: "Do not lean". The local dialect didn't know anything as radical as "I love you". The strongest expression of all feelings, "I ha di gärn" – "I quite like you" – is the same as you'd use for muesli.

"She's a dancer," says the nurse scornfully. "Wait here for her."

I recognise her by her gait: she totters towards me on high heels, her thighs pressed together. She pouts and tells me her story frankly, in a canoodling voice. Every night until four in the morning she's a little plaything, purring for the men at the bar who are after a bit of Lolita at the end of the day.

"Do you have to go to bed with them?"

"No, no. We just dance and strip. During the breaks we encourage the men to have a drink. I throw the occasional glass away – I don't drink much."

"Can't you refuse?"

"Then I'd lose my job."

She shrugs. For the twenty-five-year-old these are simply the unpleasant corollaries of the lot she had drawn. She'd rather expose herself in an affluent country than sit at a supermarket check-out back home for a pittance, getting harassed by the boss and ageing prematurely. She digs out the evidence of her good fortune, the threadbare contract with 'Cabaret Dancer' written across the top. She looks at me, waiting for a

comforting response. Then she hastily provides her justification. Her father died and her mother was made redundant at the weapons factory. Her eyes opened wide:

"Did you hear what I said? We're in the middle of a crisis and I've got a four-year-old daughter."

"Does your mother know what you're doing here?"

"Mama knows that I dance."

She says the word 'dance' often and with emphasis, rehearsing her new identity. Dancing is an art, a recognised profession, for which she has to make her sacrifices:

"I can't put on a single kilo."

She is merely a body, not a linguistically gifted being. What need has she of language, sitting at the bar with the drunkards? Her shrunken vocabulary is limited to the word 'ciao', which she uses to greet everyone, including the doctor. Intimacy as a career dissolves the distinction between private and public. She still hasn't reached the end of her story. Here comes the happy ending.

"I've met a man, someone from here. He wants to marry me."

She says it with the ecstatic intoxication of a prospector who's struck gold. She stretches, then under her breath she adds, "I can't decide. Should I leave everything behind?"

She waits, expecting me, someone who has also turned her back on her homeland, to dismiss such rhetorical doubts: "Oh, don't worry about it – get out while you can". I don't say anything.

The gynaecologist leafs through the patient's file with a disapproving look on her face. "With changing partners you should use a condom. The HIV and Hepatitis C tests are negative, and the suspicion of a sexually transmitted disease has also not been confirmed. It's just in the uterus that we've found a few changes in the cells."

Something has changed in her feminine core.

"My stomach is swollen and is making noises. Am I pregnant again?"

The pregnancy test is also negative, at which the patient is overjoyed. The doctor's face tips from distaste to sorrow. The patient had recently had a miscarriage on board the plane as she flew back home for a holiday. A happy stroke of fate, as she wouldn't have an abortion. She has morals, she stresses. The talk of covered-up penises and spermicide cream is endless; I interpret listlessly. The young woman decides to have a coil inserted and wants to ask the impresario if he will pay.

I make a slip of the tongue when interpreting, "repressario."

I was too young for this grown-up, sensible country. My attempts to provoke it to fall madly in love with me all came to nothing. Like a young mother turning away from her ageing

husband and bestowing all her passion on her son, I also placed my hopes on small children with their smell of fluffy chicks, the same the world over. I wanted to breathe it in, nestle up with their soft bodies, melt into humanity. Children still belonged to the wilderness. With them I could be playful and care-free, stripped of the rigid cultural corset. But of course babies were part of the family property; people didn't leave them in strangers' arms. They were bestowed long names as though they were dignitaries to be addressed formally. The parents spoke politely to them, keeping up the formalities, granting them an official kiss before they went to bed. If they treated their own babies like foreign diplomats, how were they going to act with me? They didn't fool around playfully teasing their little ones; that would be asking too much. Restrictions were repeated seriously and slowly:

"I've told you, no. You can't have that."

I would then wait for the parents to tear up these words and break out into laughter: "Only joking! Of course you can – here you are." At which point they'd embrace their little bundles of joy, sway them in the air, and the joy would grow and grow and carry me away with it. But no, they stuck to their word and never tore their restrictions up into pieces. They appealed emphatically to reason, preparing their children for the superficial world with which they were familiar. The idea that beyond it lay thousands of other worlds and different layers of meaning, with thousands of other delights to be savoured – that was all kept hidden. It was a sham and I railed against it. When I broke their rules, they thought it was because I was not endowed with the capacity to perceive them. They would start to offer me enlightenment but I would interrupt them,

"I know."

They'd offered me refuge in the best of all worlds and the ungrateful foreigner saw fit to ridicule their philosophy of life.

In the sandpit, they admonished their offspring, "That's not your bucket, give it back. Play with your own bucket. I bought it especially for you."

If a child pressed his bucket against his chest, they'd say proudly, "He's learning to tell mine from yours. He's coming along wonderfully!"

I'd learnt to nip egotism in the bud, to share, always to be there for others, to share in others' worries, to consider others' misfortune as my own. But here, if I got involved in others' concerns, I'd be pushed away rather than praised.

"That's not your problem."

"Everything that happens affects me somehow."

“You should enjoy your own life.”

How offensive that sounded to me! No enjoyment could be more important than the heroic struggle for the common good. How miserly to devote myself to improving my own life. I didn't want to be so small-minded; I had great plans. This was a dirty word in our dictatorship, a punishable offence, and yet here it had transformed into a hard-won achievement of democracy.

“I'm an individualist, I'm not like everyone else,” the whole country would say as if with one voice.

I was not like everyone else but in a different way: I was a visitor from the moon. Back home everything was permeable, the doors in public toilets didn't lock, we were all one single, indivisible body. And I'd been amputated from this body. A little finger was drifting loose in outer space. If I expressed my anguish, people would suggest that I alone was to blame for not getting a grip. I remained obstinate and refused to be happy in my forced marriage to the host country. I couldn't accept and didn't want any other kind of happiness besides the blending, sharing kind I knew.

A classmate of mine earned her pocket money working Saturdays in a supermarket.

“But your parents are rich.”

She was amazed at my unseemly confusion of her and her parents.

“Yes, they are, but I'm not. I have to learn to fend for myself.”

Everything was to be character-building; she had no need of wasteful giving. What a poor child with parents like that, I thought, and yet she was proud of her independence.

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nbg@london.goethe.org