

Leta Semadeni

Tamangur

Roman

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Translated by Graham Hogg

1.

It is midday, the church bells are ringing and the streets are already empty. The tar is oozing out from the cracks underfoot. The child bends down, picks out with her index finger some of the black mass and quickly waves her finger in the air to cool the tar; then she sticks it in her mouth and begins to chew, while she runs up the steep and narrow lane, quickly and with head bowed, still completely enthralled by the ending of a story the teacher has just read out. A boy and girl locked in a tight embrace are drifting on a ship laden with hay, and the moon of red gold has left a shimmering train of light on the river.

The tar in her mouth tastes dangerous.

The one ear that is still open to the noise of the outside world hears small steps coming towards her, and, as the steps go past the one open ear, the mouth says of its own volition, good day.

Only when no greeting is returned does the child tear herself away like lightning from the story of the red moon, push her spectacles up her nose and look in the direction of the steps. Further down the steep lane trots a rusty red-coloured nanny goat with a black stripe on its back. It turns its head back and looks at her as if it wants to apologise for its lack of politeness.

Sometimes Grandfather used to say Grandmother:

You are just like a goat, you can be very tame and affectionate but when you smell a herb nothing can hold you back.

A little while later the child is sitting at the table in the kitchen with Grandmother, spooning up soup. From time to time the old woman puts her soup spoon back in the dish and looks up at the ceiling.

The third chair at the table is empty. Grandfather is in Tamangur.

An elderberry bush leans down low in front of the kitchen window. It is already full of berries.

At the precise moment when a hunter is welcomed into Tamangur he loses twenty-one grams of weight because his soul leaves the body to go back to where it has previously lived.

The soul is a creature of habit, says Grandmother, it is strong even though it only weighs a

few grams, and it always gets its own way.

It can go anywhere, whenever it pleases. With its twenty-one grams it can find a place anywhere to linger a while and disrupt Grandmother's daily routine. She quarrels with the soul and scolds it:

You piece of nothing, she says, you miserable-looking little thing! What I am supposed to do with such a miserable little thing?

2.

The village is a place full of shadows, nestled deep down between the mountains, and buried even deeper down the river snarls its way to the border, engorged and gleaming.

There is a church on a hill near the edge of the forest, a schoolhouse, a few shops, restaurants, and a village square. There is a long bench there. When the bench is empty, the child sits there and wonders what stories the bench has heard. The surface of the bench is perhaps still warm which means that someone only a little earlier sat there and had the time to tell lies to the bench. That's why the bench is called the bench of lies.

The child strokes a finger over the grooves and cracks in the wood; a dog or a goat wanders past on the main road, which at this time of day shimmers in the heat of the sun and stinks of tar. No one knows why the goat without a bell is always out on its own. Has it got lost in the maze of narrow lanes? It's as if it is always searching for something.

Sometimes the child is unhappy because of the goat's fruitless searching. She cannot distance herself from the troubles of others.

On the other side of the river a side valley disappears between the mountains.

Grandfather had told the child that mountain hares and snow grouse and other creatures and plants live there which have the ability to make their coats blend into the surroundings, so perfectly that you can't see them anymore.

3.

On some evenings everything seems to taste of homesickness. Grandmother doesn't have a good word to say about the village.

It begins where it ends, she says, it's nothing more than a flyspeck on the map.

When the wind blows through the forest you can already feel the chill of autumn.

Grandmother sucks in the air through her nose with a loud noise. She does that to push back a tear welling up in her tear ducts, and then she is once again round-eyed and fiddles with her hair as she undresses.

Under her dress she wears another dress, a flesh-coloured one with glittering little hooks, which she unhooks one by one. She folds it up fussily and places it neatly on the chair, then smooths it flat with her hand.

Even when she is naked Grandmother looks like she is dressed. She stands for a moment in front of the mirror, quite still, and looks curiously into it as if another woman was standing there. She also shows the other woman her bottom and turns her head round to the mirror to see what the other woman looks like from behind, before she lets her nightdress fall down over her body.

Grandmother's feet are very small. When she is lying on the bed and her legs are stretched out, her toes look like juicy berries; but when Grandmother is standing on the carpet, the berries spread out under her weight and become flattened. Her weight presses them down into the flowers of the bedside rug. She sways once more through the bedroom, cracks the window open, returns to the mirror, takes her heavy breasts in her hands, pushes them up a little and says to the other woman in the mirror:

I still have lovely breasts.

In the feeble gleam of the street light the corset with its twinkling hooks looks just like an insect.

4.

Grandmother's heart is a big forest with thick undergrowth, with trees that soar to the heavens and trees that are short and squat, and with lots of shrubs. You can either go for a walk in it or get lost in it.

There are also clearings, which open out like a surprise. With one step the child is suddenly standing in the light, above her is the sky, the soft pillowy clouds and the sun. Then Grandmother is an angel who can fulfil any wish. She hops through the house, takes the child by the hand, runs with her to the shoe shop and in a flash buys her the red ballerina shoes the child has wanted for such a long time.

On another occasion the child is chased into the undergrowth, which scratches her feet and legs, its branches striking her in the face, and she cowers in the dark and shivers with fear of her grandmother who has turned into a witch.

Without wanting to do so the child has awakened a very bad memory in Grandmother; she has hit the wrong keys on the piano at the wrong time.

And then she hates Grandmother with all her passion. The way Grandmother presses her lips together, because a great big gobful of nasty words has formed in her mouth. The child recognises these thin lips, she has to be on her guard in such moments; she creeps into the undergrowth until the mouth has relaxed again. The big gobfuls must not come out. There are sounds and words which can slit open your heart better than any sharp knife.

Then it is advisable to disappear into the undergrowth for a while and to be very, very quiet.

The heart is just like the joints in the body, says Grandmother. Just look at India, she says. There are ninety year-old men there who can wrap their legs around their necks. The heart too needs to be constantly exercised. It has to be shocked – and stretched to breaking point so that it remains in shape. You must use it as long as it beats, otherwise it shrivels up and in the end it looks like a wrinkly old potato.

She has no wish to sit on the little bench outside the house, knitting socks. She has knitted enough socks - for Grandfather. Just so that his silky feet can come back from the hunt, having been well-protected with wool and love.

She recognises him straightaway, when he appears at the edge of the forest at the other side of the river and with large, springy steps walks down to the bridge. Whether with or without a kill he walks like a king.

(...)

10

Before Grandfather went to Tamangur, he was always the first to sit at the kitchen table in the mornings and he used to stir his coffee with a soup spoon. When the child sat down he would take his spoon with the melted cheese out of the cup and hold it up with a twinkle in his eye, and the child would be so delighted she would raise her shoulders up to her ears and begin to giggle.

Cheese in one's coffee - that was strictly forbidden by Grandmother.

You are teaching her nothing but rubbish, she scolded from the corner of the room, where she stood holding a loaf of bread pressed to her breast and cutting it into slices.

Someone *has to* do it, Grandfather said calmly, after all, you are teaching her everything else.

He looked inquiringly at the child, she nodded, so Grandfather took his army knife out of his trouser pocket and cut a couple of large chunks of cheese into her cup; he poured the hot coffee over them, sprinkled a soup spoon of sugar on top, and the child began to stir them until the cheese began to turn into bright yellow strings.

When Grandmother came to the table they both looked innocently into their cups, and Grandmother sat down in her chair with a huff and a puff. There was no deceiving her. With narrowed eyes she watched the strings forming between the cups and the child's mouth and Grandfather's moustache.

As usual, when she was glowing with rage she got a kiss from Grandfather.

There was yet another game.

In the far corner of the garden stands an old lilac tree where Grandfather and the child used to have an afternoon nap on Sundays.

Show me *your* teeth, said the child.

Grandfather took his large black wallet out of his trouser pocket. Very solemnly and very slowly. Then he peeled off from the soft leather a little package made of tissue paper. The rustling noise gave the child goose bumps every time.

There were five long yellow teeth. As many as Grandfather had gaps in his mouth. The child was allowed to touch the long yellow deer teeth, and each time she shuddered a little and had

to draw her head down between her shoulders.

When you are old, said Grandfather, while he wrapped up the deer teeth again in the tissue paper, you don't need so many teeth. You need to be able to bite when you are young. After that it's too late, he said, looking up into the crown of the lilac.

He sat there with his hands resting on his thighs. A green grasshopper crawled over his left hand and hopped on to lap of the child.

Why are your hands so big? asked the child.

Because Grandmother has such big breasts. They must have enough room, one in each hand.

Will I have breasts as big as Grandmother?

They will be exactly the right size to fit into the hand of the man who you fancy, said Grandfather, and both of them looked up into the branches of the lilac tree and dwelled on their thoughts.

It was impossible to tell whether the lilac smelt like Grandfather or Grandfather like the lilac. The lilac tree was in full bloom and the wind blew its scent all the way into the house.

In the spring lots of dandelions grow under the tree, it is a cheerful garden meadow, the earth is soft and friendly.

On some days the child stands with her back leaning on the tree stem and wonders how long it would take to dig a hole which would be big enough to swallow her up completely.

[...]

18.

Grandmother takes the carp out of the oven, checks the crust and places it on the large platter with the reed design. The platter is adorned with carrots, fennel and celery and carried into the dining room. All three of them, no, all four of them, sit down at the table, all laid in white. Grandmother places her large bust on the tabletop, where as usual it spreads itself out between her elbows and over the edge of her plate; she begins to carve up the fish carefully and to remove the flesh from the bones. Elsa receives the little crispy fins and the child gets the cheeks.

Elsa is wearing the T-shirt with the tiger on the chest. The tiger's eyes are situated directly above her nipples, and when Elsa bends her head right down to the plate the tiger's eyes move as if it too would like to greedily devour the food.

Elvis, as ever, is as quiet as a mouse and allows Elsa to feed him like a child.

The child has long ceased to be astonished about anything to do with Elsa. She is just different, Grandmother said, and we should do everything to preserve and encourage diversity – but even so the child has to let out a little giggle now.

After the meal they go into the kitchen where Grandmother once again takes out the bottle of cream from the fridge, *so that it can slip down better*.

Grandfather couldn't eat the meat of the animals that he had shot, she says suddenly, and once again she has this look on her face as she places the plates on top of each other.

At night she dreams of him. The child can tell that by the noises which Grandmother makes in her sleep. On nights like these her snoring is quieter and there are little skipped beats in between the snores. Then the child knows: he has once more crept into her dream, is perhaps coming across the river to her side, where she stands on the bank between the rocks in her pink nightdress, barefoot with little wisps of hair on the back of her neck and holding her hands out to him. The duvet stands out against the background of the wall like a mound and with each skipped beat the mound seems to shake a little.

In the past little Kasimir and his wife used to visit, no later than for dessert. But this year they are celebrating in the old folks' home. Kasimir used to sit most of the time sunk into the depths of the sofa between his wife and his own desperation. His tiny shoes stood there on the flowers of the carpet, lost beside her giant black ballerina shoes of crocodile leather, which made his sense of desperation all the more scandalous.

It was nothing to do with the size of them, it was, as Grandmother used to say, the way that the little tips of the shoes looked shyly inwards, whereas the tips of the ballerina shoes with one cheeky movement claimed the space around them.

In the past, when Grandfather was still there, Kasimir used to come to visit on his own; then he would be in a good mood, a very good mood.

You're deep in your cups again, said Grandfather; he nagged Kasimir with a slightly serious set to his mouth and a slightly amused look in his eyes, just like when he sometimes scolded the child when she got up to some mischief.

Alcohol is the chimney brush for the soul, croaked Kasimir; he even tried to do a few dance steps, but stumbled over the red lilies at the edge of the carpet and would have fallen over if the sofa hadn't been there. Hardly had he landed back in the sofa than the giggling child crept on to his lap.

Chimney brush for the soul, slurred Kasimir once more and he quickly became very still with the child in his arms, while the latter pondered on how it was possible to be deep in your cups. And also on where the soul was located.

It must be somewhere deep inside in Kasimir. The chimney sweep, with his long brush, would probably be the best person to get deep inside Kasimir through the throat. The chimney sweep, the child knew him as well; the man in black who lived on the other side of the street, a bit further along on the way out of the village, with his black brush which he used to carry over his shoulder coiled up like a snail shell. She imagined how the chimney sweep stuck the brush into Kasimir's throat – going deep down inside and in and out again – until his soul was once again really clean, just like the chimneys the sweep usually cleaned.

Kasimir is small and thin and wiry. He has a dark complexion and deep wrinkles in his face, and he smells nice.

The child was totally smitten by this scent. If his wife wasn't with him Kasimir used to laugh when the child sniffed behind his right ear. He sat there like a king and didn't look down at his shoes the whole time. And Chan the dog lay down contentedly near to him. Yes, yes, the two of us, Kasimir would say then, removing one by one the child's thin fingers from his neck.

Kasimir was always very fond of the child and the dog. Even though Chan, the old warrior, only had one testicle left, Grandmother used to proudly claim that he was the father of all the puppies in the village. With his one still undamaged ear he was always searching for a diverting adventure. In the morning he left the house and when he returned he was so tired that he fell asleep while he was still in the process of lying down. And while his left front paw was still sinking down in slow-motion he began to dream and to whimper in his sleep. Grandmother knew exactly what dogs dreamed about. They dreamed of sausages, of juicy roasts and schnitzels and large marrowbones, just like humans. And they dreamed of love. Just like her.

Let's go and see if anything has happened in the living room, says Grandmother; she places the bottle of cream back in the fridge and wobbles the pudding along the corridor in the direction of the living room. Together with Elvis Elsa opens the door. He sits down where Kasimir used to sit. At the last moment Elsa is able to stop the child from sitting on Elvis's lap. She doesn't like that at all.

The Christ Child must have taken pity on the ordinary child. He has decorated the tree and lit the candles.

Under the tree crouches the black and white plush cat from the book of fairy tales, for Grandmother there is a bottle of egg liqueur, and for Elsa there is biggest surprise of all: next to the Christmas tree is a set of stag's antlers adorned with red ribbons. Elsa cannot stay on her feet such is her joy; she kneels down and embraces the antlers.

Cherish them, says Grandmother, Grandfather shot him.

What about Elvis?, asks the child.

Grandmother slowly, as if in a dream, opens the bottle and takes a large slug to test it before she places three tiny little glasses on the table for Elsa and the child, and Elvis too, and pours out the liqueur.

Elsa is responsible for adding a sprinkle of stardust to the moment. She hops over to the record player in the corner.

And then – and then Elvis begins to sing. Loudly, so beautifully and loudly that the child lets out a little whoop of joy. Elsa takes off her pumps and dances with the child and grandmother around the sofa and out into the corridor and into the kitchen, and around the table in there, then into the dining room where the platter with the remains of the carp is still on the table, and once again back into the corridor – *Are you lonesome tonight* – and she drags the giggling child and grandmother behind her while she swings her hips and spins round - *Are you lonesome tonight? Do you miss me tonight? Are you sorry we drifted apart?*

Later, when Elsa and Elvis have gone, grandmother and Chan sit for a little while in front of the television. It starts to snow again, the flakes tumbling down the window panes; you can hear outside two birds of the night quarrelling over the kill on the garden meadow. The door to the living room is ajar. The child sits there furtively on the ground.

“When were you happiest?” asks the man on the box, and the woman answers: “Now.”
“When were you unhappiest?” asks the man, and the woman answers: “Now.”

Through the gap in the door the child can see in the blue light the back of grandmother’s head. Her hair has come free and hangs like a light grey cloud down the back of the chair. The child listens as grandmother plays with the teeth of the comb in her hand, then places it on the table and blows her nose.

[...]

26

When the doctor in the village goes over the border she lets Grandmother, with the child in tow, come with her and for one whole day Grandmother no longer thinks about Grandfather.

Everything is cheaper on the other side of the border: meat, cheese and butter. The people speak a different language and there are brothels there.

The chimney sweep also goes once a month over the border. His wife says he has business to do there, yes, but what kind of business, says the doctor; she lets go of the steering wheel and slaps her brow and shakes her head so much that her cheeks quiver.

Girls are not allowed in brothels, nor are boys; only when they are grown-up.

The priest is also not allowed to go in them. He is against brothels but the doctor thinks that if the priest was not a priest then he would go in.

There is *one of those women* in the village, she says, but she lives right on the big village square, where you can see everyone coming or going – even when it’s dark. That’s why the men would rather go over the border. They are *anonymous* there, says the doctor.

The windows on the square, you see, have eyes and ears, and those big wooden doors squeak like a pig when it’s being dragged by the tail up the steep and narrow lane to be slaughtered.

In the steep and narrow lane lives the hairdresser, who also likes to go over the border; he even takes his daughter with him, and now and then her little friend, the child, so that the daughter doesn’t get bored if she has to wait in the restaurant, sat in front of a plate of dumplings or pancakes.

The daughter from the steep and narrow lane doesn’t know why her father travels over the border. She just looks forward to the dumplings and the pancakes when she gets into her father’s car with her friend.

She’s a pretty one, that little girl, says the doctor, it’s just a pity she has the same bandy legs as her mother, no wonder the old man goes over the border.

When the hairdresser travels over the border with his daughter and the child he tells them about olden times, about horses and about how bitterly cold it was then and how the men had to wrap their crown jewels in newspaper so that they wouldn't freeze solid when they were sitting in the saddle for hours on end. The child listens attentively; she really likes him – because of his nose which reminds her of the goat.

Another time, when the goat that doesn't wear a bell went past the child again, she closed her eyes and imagined it was the hairdresser. Then she said good day again, and the goat turned round as if it was the hairdresser. Then she tap tap tapped with her foot and it trotted on with its hairdresser face.

The chimney sweep, however, doesn't visit brothels. With him it's something else. He doesn't like women.

He really is a *pervert*, says the doctor.

Every evening the chimney sweep buys his packet of blue Gauloises in the Alpenrose hotel, drinks a glass of red wine at the bar and has a chat with the waitress, Claudia. She understands that now and then he has to go over the border.

27.

Above the restaurant in the Alpenrose there is a room with a thin wooden wall. Luzia, the daughter of the owner of the Alpenrose, who sits next to the child in school even though she is three years older, looks at regular intervals through a knot-hole in the wall and tells the child when it is getting *interesting*. The girls are standing very quietly in the dark corridor so that the people, being stark naked, don't get a fright. The man and the woman are running around the room and giggling, or they creep on top of each other and pant.

Now they are fucking, says the girl from the Alpenrose. All grown-ups fuck, and that chimney sweep, who doesn't like women, well he fucks men.

Sometimes the girl from the Alpenrose takes the child with her to her little church, which is situated in the lower part of the village, in a large garden with fruit trees. Luzia takes pity on the child as she is not allowed to steal any mirabelle plums from the priest's garden. Luzia herself is allowed to steal so long as she goes to confession afterwards, this way she will be forgiven for everything.

That's why it's far better to be Catholic, says Luzia, and the child ponders her words. It smells so good in the little Catholic church.

The two girls stand in the fading evening light at the entrance to the church and Luzia teaches the child how to cross herself. The priest in his ample, brown habit walks up to them, smiles, and takes out of his deepest pocket two little red apples. He rubs them on his habit until they shine; for he doesn't know yet that Luzia and the child have been stealing his mirabelle plums.

The child is never bored when she is with Luzia from the Alpenrose. Behind the church and

hidden by the trees is the priest's chicken coop with its boring, clucking hens and the black rooster that walks about just like the teacher of the older classes.

One time Luzia took a bottle of schnapps into the chicken coop and soaked soft pieces from her breaktime sandwich in the schnapps. Together with the child, she placed the damp crumbs in front of the cockerel and it greedily pecked them all up. Afterwards it staggered about, just like Kasimir when he was deep in his cups, and then it crowed at all the wrong times and made such a racket and even clucked like a hen – which so unsettled the chickens that for a couple of days they didn't want to lay any more eggs.

And the child giggled and laughed, really loudly, so much so that she couldn't stop laughing – then all of a sudden her laughing changed into sobbing and Luzia, her eyes wide open in disbelief, said, come on, it's not so bad; tomorrow the cockerel will be back to normal.