
Zofka Kveder

Her Life

And outside, the deep, deathly, threatening stillness of night!
A soundless silence outside, menacing and foreboding.

Fate stood at the door. She felt it with all her being, and feared it. The curtain falls - the monster grins into her eyes with a hellish mockery.

Whose guffaw was this - whose?

No, no, it was a carriage rattling outside.

She stirred. A mistake. What business would a carriage have to be doing up there in the dead of night?

But no!

There came indeed the clatter of horses' hooves. And now it stopped in front of the house.

She sprang up, into the hall, to the door. Her knees were trembling, she could barely turn the key in the lock.

Her son stood on the doorstep.

"He-he, Mama ... Have you been waiting up for me tonight, too?" he stammered thickly. _

"I've been away long, haven't I, long ... But I'm back after all," he laughed.

She could tell by his voice alone that he was drunk. A loathsome stench of drink rose from him.

She locked the door and followed him into the room.

He flopped down on the bench at the table. He had no overcoat and was all crumpled and rumpled. His face was bloated with drink, his eyes bloodshot, his young beard tousled, his hair hanging untidily over his forehead.

"Where have you been?" she breathed.

"Nowhere, *maman*, nowhere..." The words came confused, by fits and starts. "That's just the hell of it - nowhere! ... I wanted to go far, y'know... Far away, to America... It would've been better if I'd breezed off overseas, y'know... over the ocean wide ... Eh, *maman*, it's true I never said goodbye ... not even 'bye ... But still it would've

been better ... better if ... if you hadn't seen me again than that you see me ...”

“To America?!” cried the mother. “And without a farewell?”

“Yes, without a farewell, *maman* ... Folks like me don't go hugging people when they're heading for hell, he-he ... The night takes them, and that's all proper and right... Right for them and right for their mothers and for other people ... He- he ...”

“And what have you been doing all this time? Where have you been?”

“Where have you been, my son, he-he ...” he mocked her. “I've told you, I haven't been anywhere ... I had a fling in the old town, with the tarts ... He-he ... Don't you shrink away now ... Smart girls, *maman*, real smart... They've such dandy hair-dos, you know, dandy ... And they're perfumed, *maman*, real smart... with every possible scent... They've such white, soft hands, he-he ... Not calloused like yours. Y'know, what calluses like yours, yours and Lena's, work and scrape together in ten, twenty years, those hands, those sinful white hands, will take and fritter away in a few nights ... There's the ladies in the old town for you ... In a few nights ... in a week ... And it's a trifle to them, too ... These jokes cost a pretty penny, y'know, *maman* ... For counts and barons, *maman*, for rich folks ... But a beggar doesn't mind a go at it either, *maman* ... He-he ... Give me a drink, *maman*, I'm thirsty ...”

His mother poured him water from a clay jug standing by the window.

“He-he, water ... That's what you always drink, water and chicory... That's not right, y'know, dammit, not right at all... You oughter be drinking mead and eating honeydew, *maman* ...” he babbled with drunken loquacity.

“You deserve it... But that's how it goes, people who deserve silk armchairs sit on rickety farm stools, and undeserving folks have everything: velvet and gold, soft pillows, roast every day, and champagne ... Ugh, this water of yours is no good, *maman* ... I've got used to champagne over the week, and sweet rosolio ... He-he ... And I've eaten nothing but pates and delicacies ... choice morsels for gentlefolks ...”

He was swaying and slumping over the table. An odious laughter played around his lips, revealing teeth white and young, yet already decaying. He was drumming his dirty fingers on the table and tapping his heel on the floor.

His mother stood before him tall and pale. Her face seemed

made of stone, framed by thick white hair which rose into a stern halo above the forehead. Her son's laughter beat against her cheek like a stinking, loathsome cesspool ... She writhed beneath it like a tortured beast...

"You look classy, *maman*, classy ..." the son stammered, surprised into awe by her appearance.

"And money? ... Where did you get the money?" the mother asked harshly, clasping her hands tight, the knuckles cracking.

"Money? ... Hmm, where? He-he ... I took it. I haven't any myself, y'know that... He-he ..." he laughed drunkenly.

In the mother's eyes, the son's face was beastly, revolting. A loathing beyond words filled her heart.

"And who did you take it from? Tell me, who?!" she insisted, leaning closer.

"You'll be angry, I know ... He-he, you're a regular Puritan! ... But is it my fault that Lena is so dumb? ..."

"Lena?"

"Yes, her ... Hell, I'd had no idea, he-he ... that she was that well-heeled ..."

"You took it from her?"

"Yes, her, Lena, *maman* ..."

"How much did you take?"

"Everything, *maman* ... Everything! That's me: everything!
... He-he, everything! ..."

"How everything? ... She keeps her money in a savings bank..."

"That's where I took it from, obviously, he-he ... All she's got at home is thirty silver crowns, thirty beggarly crowns wrapped up in flowered paper and stashed away in a box ... He-he, what's the use of that! ... She had her savings book sewn up in her pallet under her pillow ... I gave her an old arithmetic primer instead of the savings book, he-he ... She sleeps sounder if she feels something under her head ... I know she hasn't noticed yet... I could've made off with it overseas three times over, and she still wouldn't have known ... He-he, I never was a fool..."

"You stole money from our Lena?! ... Our Lena?"

“Murderess!” the night hissed.

“Murderess! Murderess!” cried her soul.

She bent over her son. Seizing him by the shoulders, she peered close, close into his face, her eyes wild, full of a white, monstrous horror.

It’s not true! Nothing happened, nothing!

But a terrible, deathly rattle was coming from her son’s pain-twisted mouth.

The throes of death seized him, shook him, stretched him flat. His eyes rolled white, his hands grasped at the air with terrible, tapering fingers.

“Son!”

She raised his head. Bloodflecked foam came trickling from his mouth. The body quivered a few more times, the chest rose, the hands struck once more against the floor.

“Son! I never hurt you! Son!”

Terrible tears were wrung from her heart, dropping from her eyes. She was weeping blood, her heart’s most bitter blood ...

“Son! Rajko! My only! My darling!”

She stammered and called to him, as if out of her mind.

Springing to her feet, she doused him with water. But the body remained motionless, not a muscle stirred.

“Son!”

She stopped. Stared.

A terrible, icy calm welled up in her soul. She turned to stone like an enchanted statue.

She gazed at her son fearfully. She dared not touch him again. She looked on him as on something alien, terrible.

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She dared not touch her trembling lips to his cheek.

“Forgive me! I could not help myself!”

Quietly, she went out into the night.

But outside, monstrous shadows enveloped her again.

Murderess!

She ran down a steep path towards the sea.

Her whole life flashed before her eyes in an unbroken sequence of images. The afternoon when she first set eyes on Roman Sterle, her husband - the wedding, and all that followed, on and on, all those long years, all the joys and sorrows, up to that very night. Elica, Mirko, Mimica, Rajko’s birth ... The children’s deaths and the

losing battle against her husband's legacy...

Where had it started, when had it started?

So much suffering, so many tears, toils and labours, and all swept away!... So many pains, so much striving, courage, persistence, and all in vain! So many wishes, hopes, longings, and so little happiness! Only darkness, only grief. ... Her life had left no mark ... all those long, toilsome years had been empty ... All roads led to death and destruction, and none to the journey's end ...

Ah, had not her heart been honest and courageous, her soul filled with confidence? Whatever life had given her, it had crushed and snatched away again ... Lashed by deceptions, she bore the weary burden of her fate ... Her life was like a trampled field ... All broken, destroyed, all that she had sown, all that had blossomed, promising bounty and beauty ... Only thorns, barren rock everywhere ... None of the promises of her youth had come true ... Fear and emptiness would remain after her ... Death and horror ...

She felt a rush of pity for herself, sad and bitter.

Why, why all this?

She had killed her son with her own murderous hand! Oh, and how much love there had been in her soul for him! How she had loved him! How she had suffered!

Where, when had it started?

In the dark before her flashed a lovely, merry, sunny day... It was the day when she had first set eyes on Roman, her husband ...

Alas, what had been born of those bright hours - what grief, what misery!

Her heart smarted with a desperate pain. She stumbled and fell.

"I am a victim, too," she saw, "I, too!"

She wept like a child, for herself, for her life, her children, the son she had killed with her own hand.

She raced down the slope even faster. Sand and stones flew loose in the wake of her steps.

The dark sea stretched into the distance like black velvet, calm and still. The night was starless, filled with terrible secrets.

From beneath a cliff came the sound of soft breathing, a sighing in the deep.

"Forgive me, O Lord of creation, forgive me!"

She threw herself down, worn, wretched, yearning for peace and rest, forgotten.

A hollow splash rose beneath the night sky. The waves struck against the rocks, rippled, and the black sea closed again into a smooth, calm, silent surface.

Translated by Nada Grošelj

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