

# Ivana at the Seaside

## (Excerpt in English)

Translated by: Kristina Reardon

Contact of the translator: kristina.reardon@gmail.com

“I saw ad on internet, you still have armoire? ... I... come by,” a woman’s voice enunciated in a distinctly soft way. Twenty minutes later, a lady my age was at the door, in an actual black mini skirt, draped in glittering jewelry with screaming pink lipstick smeared from nose to chin. Her (Bosnian? Serbian? Montenegrin?) pimps in black, each with a diamond earring in his left lobe, staggered with the armoire, and we stood in the hallway smiling at each other in embarrassment.

“Ukraine?”

“Yes and no. Close: Russia.”

“I adore Russian writers.”

She looked at me wide-eyed from under her thick mascara.

“Tsvetaeva, Brodsky, Mandelstam...” I said encouragingly.

“You know?” she said, genuinely surprised, which made me think that she might be some kind of teacher who had just gotten into a sticky situation and, despite her nonchalant behavior, her new sideline wasn’t easy on her. But she obviously did not want to continue the conversation in that direction and fell silent.

“And how are things where you’re from now? After the Russian invasion of Crimea? You’re from around that area, aren’t you?” I imagined our armoire in her den, the walls of which must be painted pink, where she spent her days, more sleepy than awake, after poledancing drugged up all night in a gloomy bar.

“For us it is OK,” she shot back, as if she’d just been waiting for that question. Time and time again, I am amazed by this fear and denial, ingrained down to the bone at a young age, in a way a person who has lived under a regime never shakes off, no matter where he makes his home afterwards. And it was still not entirely clear to me whether she was Russian or Ukrainian.

“Is it dangerous, are they fighting there?” I pretended I didn’t know.

She waved her hand, her bracelets jangling, as if refusing a coffee being offered to her: “Peace is full of danger, not war.”

[...]

*We have enough tobacco, and since classes ended on St. Vitus Day, we’ve been sitting at a crowded cafe every day and drinking plum brandy, watered down rakia, and caffe d’orzo made from pure barley, Adrian writes to his wife in that summer, but we can only stay out until ten because there’s a curfew. Korzo Promenade is wonderfully lively, they have lamb roasting on a spit there for 65 dinar a pound. At the market, the only things you can get are onions, garlic, and an immeasurable amount of strawberries. I’d like to send you a packet of sugar and a bit of rendered fat, but there isn’t any to be found. I eat in the mess hall, I’ve only had a chicory coffee substitute once, we’re stuck with potato bread. I regret not paying attention more in the kitchen because our cook knows so few recipes. Even though it has just been harvested, there is no flour, and meanwhile farmers have stockpiles of money. When there is a church council meeting, a patron saint day, more than a thousand people gather, accordian players come, and people do circle dances. Locals pay around 200, 300 dinar each. They have well-lined purses, but you can only get supplies here if you know someone. It’s the same old song and dance in*

*Belgrade: dancers, singers, music in every bar. If you have money, you can get whatever you want, from sweets to silk. A pair of sandals, which cost 100 dinar when I arrived, now costs 2,500 dinar.*

Ivana immediately goes to Krmolec, the shoemaker, and orders a pair of sandals in size eleven. *I'll only pay for them when I weigh them, and if they are more than three quarters of a pound, I won't take them,* she threatens him. The German post office does not allow packages heavier than a half pound, which is just enough for one sandal per box. She would send much more when she could get it, which would also somewhat ease her conscience, because lately she was drifting off to other worlds: she imagined hugs and a smile, that crooked smile, that beam across his face, that kindly witty look.

*I survived sunstroke, but that's nothing; some of them died of tropical malaria.*

Ivana's stomach churns again, the threat washing hot over her body: if Adrian dies, it will be her personal punishment. She never believed in that Catholic an eye-for-an-eye revenge, but some higher being would reproach her if she didn't feel things correctly, if she didn't do everything in her power, if her thoughts weren't clear as crystal, if she neglected her skin, which she thought was just drying out, her skin that had been so deserted in the absence of a man's touch.

*We Slovenians are like one family. Here the peace of God exists, we're only reminded of the war by inflation or a lack of this or that, or some kind of sudden visit. Recently, a fresh breeze has been blowing through, as we were a popular capital for various "dukes" and their gangs. Drunkenness, violence, robbery, killing were on order, daily. Now, however, those who are here to take power have done so, and the whole place has breathed easier since.*

If Adrian were to be killed or wounded, it would be her fault, it would be a result of her lack of love, her fickleness, her feebleness, her weak will; she must persevere because a new sense of foreboding is already creeping up on her, a sense that she could destroy her husband with her actions – this threat, this new form of fear, was thrust upon her, the woman who once so bravely defied the people of Škale.

*I teach a Russian emigrant, an engineer, conversational German. I don't charge him because he has nothing. They serve me thin fruit preserves, brandy and coffee. The Russian lent me a bathing suit, for what urbanites here call "goin' in the beach." One store is called The Louvre, the other Moscow, we have two pubs, Kazina and Bulevar. Otherwise it awfully primitive. I got your packages so far: white pants, three handkerchiefs, three pairs of Bata socks, a tie, some thread, and some scented soap.*

Ivana is in a better mood again. Adrian's news is no longer shocking, it has become a part of daily life, hers and his, and they have become accustomed to distance, at least in this instant it feels that way, in this moment where one day flows into the next, exactly the same, and as long as it is like this, it will be fine, let it be, because then it will certainly blow up either way... so it is not so very wrong if Ivana heads to the forest again with her basket for mushrooms, following the same path, heart pounding, the fresh air and the scent of mud ignited in her blood and her mind and a youthful excitement possessing her.

*Here is one for Slovenian language and one for geography, two of the same for arithmetic and one for history... although soon this will have to be rewritten,* Vitali tells her. He stands among the ferns and a church bell can be heard from afar. It's the first time the music has sounded nice, the thought flashes through Ivana's mind. *A few more mushrooms, as an alibi.* On top of the small cloth, under which the five books are hidden, he places three penny buns and two boleti. *For each book, a mushroom grows.*

Ivana smiles at him. And then he looks at her so nicely again that she felt her whole body flush and she got butterflies in her stomach. *Death to fas... good luck,* he says to her.

*Good luck,* she replies.

At the end of August, Pina's neck swells up and she gets a high fever, becomes hoarse, and a snotty discharge runs out her itchy nose. Ivana is desperate: she knew, knew that something was going to happen, but she didn't write a word to Adrian about Pina's diphtheria, she had to endure this punishment on her own, she would bear the burden herself, he endured enough already. She thinks about how she reacted to Pina's cries, to her wishes, which were demands sometimes, how she reacted to her illnesses, which were milder than this was now, and it seemed to her that she never did it quite right, she blamed herself, and she got a knot in her stomach every time.

*Everyday I read about murder and punishments in the Donau-Zeitung. I am afraid something bad will happen to you two, a Serbian letter bearing a King Peter stamp says. I keep thinking about how you two look, what you're doing, what you're wearing, what you're eating. Watch out for dysentery and typhus, they are widespread here. It's nice that Pina is interested in animals. I myself have had every creature in the animal kingdom in my room, from lice and rats to mice, cockroaches, and fleas. The sheets, however, looked as if I had sprinkled them with blueberries and then laid down on them after the battle with the bedbugs.*

On a September afternoon, Ivana, too, lay on a blanket covered in blueberries and on her raincoat. It was as if a theatrical lighting director above the treetops had hidden the spotlight, so that the contrast between the tiny bright spots of sun through the leaves is softer, and just before Ivana closes her eyes, the world turns; death becomes loves and love sits on the other side of the compass's needle, opposite death, south is north and east is west; Kaonik shifts still further away, off somewhere in Bulgaria, and the forest grows like moss over the reich and in the oblique sunlight, shining through the branches, Ivana sees the raised corner of a mouth and then feels the warmth of Vitali's skin, smelling of dampness, walking, and smoke, Vitali is around her and in her, as low hazelwood branches sway in slow motion just above the ground.

*I'm not going to sketch you so they won't be able to recognize you if they catch me - but I'll remember you. I would paint you all, all of you, I wouldn't construct you from two different pieces, from the head of one woman and the body of another like in Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe. This is their temporary home, without windows and doors, a home with the bear necessities, with a blanket, blueberries, and a bottle of wine, its impermanence is its beauty, its impermanent and temporary space, for space is always connected to time, as home is with life: a stone's throw away from their breakfasts there was a stump with rings which testified to the age of the former tree, and a snail left its salivary matter on it, and a spider outlined its home as a hunting ground from the thread it had made from itself. Ivana and Vitali lay in this home without walls, which no one could break into, they lay in the grass without breakfast, without aging, in this restricted time without spacial boundaries, and Ivana remembers Adrian's once contradictory but now so fitting words: *Enjoy all the beauty that you feel, but don't think about where it comes from... If you hear the rustling of the leaves moving in the evening wind, don't listen to it, don't try to figure out what it wants to tell you... Dream, dear, dream, and be happy in your dreams.**

And it repeats itself a second, third time, becoming a ritual in the middle of the forest, for when Vitali covers Ivana everything freezes, and he, too, stops, only his warmth spreads into her, shields her from the world and protects her under him, they listen in silence, how they are filled with slow blood which rushes toward their hypodermis, from him to her and back, the warmth washes over them, filling them slowly, with a discreet but persistent power that comes in slow, fragmented at first, then in violent echoes.

[...]

A portly pair at the door forced themselves forward, hurrying to take away a German sewing machine. With southern Balkan accents, they asked me why it was for sale, and their tone let me know that it was not worth selling them a bill of goods because they would leave the deal

as winners either way. I knew I would never be able to sell them the machine at the advertised price, and I was in a hurry, so I agreed to their drastic price reduction. Almost offended that it was going so smoothly for them, they finally looked around the room to see if there was more to be won so they at least had the pleasure of bargaining. Juona winked at the old Singer in the corner, which had long served not as a sewing machine but as a piece of furniture.

“That’s not for sale.”

“We’ll take it.” He pulled a crumpled twenty from his back pocket and thrust it at me.

“Not for sale. I’m not selling it. I don’t know how to explain this to you. It’s not able to be had.”

“It’s a cad?” she said in Bosnian, misunderstanding and laughing. “You mean up for grabs, don’t you?”

“Surely it’s not vulgar,” he followed up, then got serious. “Fine, how about twenty-five.”

“I’m only selling the one in the yellow case.”

The two laughed again.

“She means *yellow*,” the woman said as she turned to her husband, translating the Bosnian word for the color. Then she looked at me: “And by the way, the word case in Slovenian means casket in Bosnian.”

