

# Ivana Looks Out to Sea

(Excerpt in English)

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‘I’ve seen online advert, is wardrobe still available? ... Yes... On my way,’ said a woman’s voice, noticeably soft in her diction. Within twenty minutes, a woman of around my age was at the door, wearing a black skirt that was certainly mini, with pink lipstick glaring from her nose to her chin, and adorned in glistening jewellery. We stood awkwardly in the hallway, smiling at one another, as her two (Bosnian? Serbian? Macedonian?) henchmen, dressed in black, each with a diamond in their left ear, fuffed around with the wardrobe.

‘Ukraine?’

‘Yes and no – close. Russia.’

‘I adore Russian poetry.’

She glared intensely from under her thick mascara.

‘Tsvetaeva, Brodsky, Mandelstam...’ I ventured.

‘You know them?’ she asked, genuinely surprised, which made me think she was perhaps a teacher of some sort, but things had not turned out well and in spite of her nonchalant attitude, it was not easy to have gone astray. But this was a conversation she clearly did not wish to pursue, and she stopped talking.

‘And how are things where you are now? After Russian invaded Crimea? That’s where you’re from, thereabouts, isn’t it?’ I pictured our wardrobe in her den, walls definitely painted pink, where she spent her days mostly in a state of slumber, before she would then spend the whole night poledancing in some murky bar.

‘All fine with us,’ she blurted, as if she had been waiting for that question. Time and again I’m taken aback by the fear that accompanies denial; harboured in the bones from an early age, a fear which for someone who has lived under a regime can never be shaken, no matter where that person may later live. It was still not exactly clear whether she was Russian or Ukrainian.

‘Is it dangerous, are they fighting over there?’ I feigned ignorance.

With a jangle of bracelets she waved her hand, as if refusing a cup of coffee: ‘It’s peacetime that’s dangerous, not war.’

[...]

That summer, Adrijan writes to his wife, his language revealing traces of his Serbian surroundings: *We have plenty of tobacco, and since class ended on St. Vitus’ Day, we spend our time sitting outside a packed café, drinking slivovitz, rakia with a tot of water, or Turkish coffee made from pure barley – but only until ten, because that’s when the curfew starts. Korzo Promenade is bustling, they sell spit-roast lamb for 140 dinars per kilo. The only things at the market are onions and garlic, and limitless quantities of strawberries. I wish I could send you both the odd packet of sugar and a slab of lard, but there isn’t any. I eat in the canteen, I’ve tried chicory coffee just once and they make the bread with potato. I regret not paying more attention in the kitchen, because our cook really doesn’t know many recipes at all. There’s no flour, even though harvest season has only just ended, yet the farms have stacks of money. Whenever the church council gathers, for blessings of the local church, it attracts more than a thousand people; they come with their accordions and dance in circles. Folk pay around 200, 300 dinars. There’s no shortage of money, but for supplies you need contacts. I’ve heard it’s*

*the same in Belgrade: dancers, singers, music in every tavern. If you've got money you can get whatever you want, from sweets to silk. A pair of sandals which cost 100 dinars when I got here are now worth 2500 dinars.*

Ivana goes straight to Krmolec, the shoemakers, and orders a pair of sandals in a size ten. *I'll only pay for them once I've weighed them, and if they weigh more than four hundred grams, I won't take them,* she warns him. The German postal service won't allow parcels that weigh more than two hundred grams, which is just enough for one sandal per parcel. There's many more things she'd send, if she could only get her hands on them, and that might ease her conscience a little, for recently she has been led into other worlds: she would picture embraces and a smile, that raised left-hand corner of the mouth, that glint of sunlight across that face, that warm expression, so full of character.

*I survived the sunstroke, but that's nothing, some of them were killed by tropical malaria.*

Ivana's stomach churns again, a sense of blame flows hot through her veins: if Adrijan dies, it will be her punishment. She never did believe in that eye-for-an-eye Catholic vengeance, but some higher power will teach her a lesson if she does not rein her feelings in, if she does not do everything she can; if her thoughts are not pure as snow, if she forgets about her skin, which seemed to be drying out; her skin, so neglected without a man's touch.

*We Slovenes are like one big family. There's a holy peace here; the only reminder of war is inflation, the odd unavailable item or two, or an unexpected visit. There's been a light, bracing wind of late; we were the favourite capital of many different "dukes" and their gangs. Boozing, violence, looting, and murder were all a daily occurrence. Now those who came to take control have done just that, and the whole place has breathed a sigh of collective relief.*

If Adrijan is killed or injured, it will be her fault, it will be the fault of her insufficient love, her fickle nature, her weakness, her feeble will; hold on she must, because that new sense of foreboding, a sense that she could lose her husband on account of her actions, is already setting in, and in her, of all people: the woman who once so valiantly defied the people of Škale, now stifled by that threat, that new form of fear.

*I go to teach German conversation to some Russian émigré, an engineer. I don't charge him anything, because he has nothing. They welcome me with conserves, rakia and coffee. The Russian lends me swimming trunks, for 'going to the beach', as they call it here in the metropolis. There's a shop called Louvre, another called Moskva, and we've got two taverns – Kazina and Bulevar. Other than that it's very primitive. I received your package with the following: white trousers, three handkerchiefs, three pairs of socks, a tie, some thread and some fragranced soap.*

Ivana's mood improves again, Adrijan's news is no longer worrisome, it's become a part of the day-to-day, hers and his; they've grown used to the distance, or so it seems for a second, at this moment, when one day bleeds into the next, the same again, and as long as it continues this way it will be fine, how it should be, because then somehow all will come good... and so is it so very wrong for Ivana to go back to the woods, with her mushroom-picking basket... she treads the same path and her heart beats, the fresh air and smell of mud send blood and thoughts racing, and gripped by youthful agitation.

*Here's one for Slovene language and one for geography, two for accounting and one for history... though that one will soon need rewriting,* Vitaly tells her. He's standing among the ferns and church bells can be heard in the distance. That's the first time I've heard nice music, it occurs to Ivana. *Just a couple more mushrooms, as an alibi.* On top of the napkin, which is hiding five books, she places three ceps and two boletes. *For each book of knowledge, there's a mushroom to forage.*

Ivana smiles at him. And then he looks at her again, so handsomely that she feels a tingle down her spine and butterflies in her stomach. *Death to fa... take care,* he says to her.

*Take care,* she replies.

At the end of August, Pina's neck swells and she gets a fever, becomes wheezy and a snotty stream flows from her crusty nose. Ivana is distraught: she knew, she knew that something would happen, but she doesn't mention a word about Pina's diphtheria to Adrijan, she has to bear this punishment alone, she will shoulder her own burden, for he has already been through enough. She recalls all the times she's reacted to Pina's crying, to her wants and needs, which are sometimes demands, to her bouts of illness, which were all much milder than this one, and she feels as if she's never done a single thing right; she blames herself, causing a pang in her stomach every time.

*I read about the deaths and the punishments in Donau-Zeitung every day. I'm scared, for the both of you, says a Serbian letter bearing a King Peter stamp. I can't stop thinking about what the two of you must look like now, what you're doing, what you've had to eat. Watch out for dysentery and typhus – they're rife around here. Nice to hear that Pina takes an interest in animals. I had the entire animal kingdom in my room here too: mice, cockroaches and fleas, as well as the lice and the rats. And after a battle with the bedbugs, my sheets looked as if I'd laid down on a bed of blueberries.*

That September afternoon, Ivana is also lying upon an expansive carpet of blueberries, and her raincoat. It's as if, above the treetops, the lighting technician has dimmed the spotlights to soften the contrast between the scattered blotches of bright sunshine through the leaves, and just before Ivana closes her eyes, the world turns; death becomes love and as the compass needle turns, love switches sides, opposite death; south is north and east is west; Kaonik moves even further away, to somewhere in Bulgaria, and like moss the forest spreads all over the Reich, and Ivana stares into the slanting rays of sun piercing through the branches, and above her catches a glimpse of the corner of his mouth drawing upwards, and feels Vitaly's warm skin, which smells of damp, pine and smoke; Vitaly is all around her, inside her, and the wooden branches hovering just above the ground slowly sway.

*I'm not going to draw you, in case they catch me and they recognise you – but I'll remember you. I'd paint all of you, every part of you, I wouldn't put you together with the head of one woman and the body of another, like in Luncheon on the Grass. This, here, is their makeshift home, a home without windows and doors, with the bare essentials, with a carpet, blueberries and a glass of wine, there's beauty in its makeshift nature, this makeshift and emergency space, for space can never be separated from time, just like home cannot be separated from life: rings on a tree stump, a stone's throw from the pair on the grass, testify to the age of the tree that once was; upon it a snail leaves its slimy trail and a spider weaves its hunting ground-home. Ivana and Vitaly lie there in this home without walls, walls which no-one shall burst through, they lie on the grass without luncheon, without aging, at the frontier of time with limitless space, and Ivana recalls the once-contradictory, but now so very fitting, words from Adrijan: *Take pleasure in all the beauty you experience, but don't over-think where it comes from... feel the crackling of the leaves in the evening breeze, don't listen out for it, don't seek to understand what it's trying to tell you... Dream, my darling, dream; and in your dreams be happy.**

For a second time, a third, more, they repeat that which was to become ritual, there in the middle of the forest; when Vitaly envelops Ivana and everything stops still, he is still too, all that moves is the warmth of his skin, slowly over her body, shielding her from the world and protecting her beneath him; in the silence they attune to the sound of the slow rush of blood rising to the surface of their skin, their bodies flooded with warmth, from him to her and back again, slowly restoring one another with a subtle but enduring force that comes in slow, sporadic ripples at first, but then in powerful waves.

[...]

The ample couple at the doorway barged their way forwards, in a hurry to take the German sewing machine away. In dialect, with a strong south-eastern European accent, they asked why I was selling it, with undertones that signalled there was no point in trying to deceive them, because they would emerge victorious in any case. I knew there was no way I would be able to sell it to them for the advertised price, but I was quite pressed for time, and so settled for their drastic reduction. Almost hurt that it had been so easy for them, they proceeded to look around the room, checking if there was money to be made elsewhere, which would give them the joy of haggling, at least. Junona gestured towards the old Singer in the corner, which had long served as part of the furniture, and no longer as a sewing machine.

‘I’m not selling that one.’

‘We’ll take it.’ From his back trouser pocket he pulled a tattered twenty note and waved it at me.

‘It’s not for sale. I’m not selling it. I don’t know how else to make it clear... It’s not available.’

The woman smiled: ‘available’ clearly meant something else in her language.

‘She’s probably not being vulgar,’ he explained to her, when the smile had gone from his face. ‘But fine, then – twenty and five.’

‘I’m only selling the one in the yellow case.’

They started smiling again.

‘She means *yellow*,’ the woman said in Bosnian, turning to her husband. And then she looked at me: ‘and your word for case is our word for coffin.’

