

“Wake up! We’re at a station. We need to get water!”

Lote is on her feet in an instant. It’s her and Filipine’s turn to go get it.

They should bathe Antonija’s baby; it seems it hasn’t been changed in days.

“*Kipjatok! Kipjatok!*” the station women bark at them. So they’re going to have to pay for the water.

Filipine follows right on her heels.

“Where are your handlers?”

“I don’t have handlers.”

“So you’ve been sent to spy on us, huh? All an act. You force yourself on everyone with your kindness and then blah-blah-blah report back to your lice-ridden bosses.”

“God, Filipine, I wish you’d choke on your own tongue! Any other day I’d slap you across the face. But here they’d shoot us for that. So take the bucket and bring it back to the train. Have them drink it all now, so we can fill it up a second time. I’ll try to find us some milk.”

Filipine goes.

Hateful bitch.

Lote swallows the words.

A woman with dry, narrow eyes stands by the station building, selling glass jars and chives. She’ll take what she can get. They don’t have any food. Lote slips in to see the stationmaster on duty. Watery blue eyes, wire-rimmed glasses on a nose like a mountain ridge. They exchange a few words, and Lote is already on her way to the shed next door to see the stationmaster’s wife. A sad and obedient woman. Yes, they have a goat. Lote milks it dry and leaves the good woman a half-empty bottle of H. A. Briefer perfume, “Beauty Queen”, which Ms Justine had taken out of her purse to help with Lote’s shift.

And suddenly there's a soldier with a bayonet.

"Kuda prjosh! A nu-ka poshla obratno!"

This is a completely different soldier. It's been two days since she's seen the Stavajparsa troika. This soldier is slow, gruff and fatherly. Bloodshot, sleepless eyes, muscular biceps and the smell of iron coming from his mouth.

"Moj rebjonok golodajet," Lote squeaks meekly, not recognizing herself.

"Davaj, davaj, bistroje."

He spits to the side and walks Lote back to the train. She stumbles into the train car, the bunch of chives under her arm and the jar of milk in her hand. The door slams shut, the boom falls into place. The train jerks into motion. The segmented boa constrictor crawls onward.

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"Homeward, homeward, let's hurry. Life is good at our Father's house! Life has drawn to a close, My feet melt in the hot sun. Narrow paths are hard to travel, Home, home is where I want to be!

"I arrive home, that's where I'm happy! I'll confess my sins to my Father, I am his heir, Surely he'll let his children in. He who was lost, shall be found, He who has died, shall live on.

"Friends, children, be patient, We'll all return to our rightful homes! The years fly past as if on wings, The past will be the past. Night falls, morning comes. At night, sleep is a single moment.

Bogene by Gundega Repše
Translated by Kaija Straumanis

“Our Father in Heaven, receive us, We fall to our knees before you! All our clothes will be magnificent, crowns on our heads, rings on our fingers. Welcome home your children, Father, We’re all coming home.”

The old man sings shakily, starting with a low *do* and ending with *fa* in a rusty countertenor.

People stare, grumble and ignore him. Everyone has his own destiny. *What about women bothers men? Firstly – there are as few heads of hair curlers at the kitchen table as there are unwashed faces. Secondly – crooked pantyhose lines and other signs of orderliness offend a man’s sensibility for symmetry. Thirdly – habitually loose and visible camisole straps are unbearable, even to the most loving of husbands—*

Lote reads the wrinkled strip of newspaper that had been wrapped around the bunch of lilacs for Maksimilian’s mother. The soldiers had torn it out of her hands and thrown it down, right on the sidewalk; the strip of newspaper had stayed crumpled in her purse.

Fifty percent of the beauty of your face depends on your hair . . . poplar shine-serum, poplar cream.

She reeks. You can’t take it anymore if even you disgust yourself. When Lote returned with the milk and chives, there wasn’t any water left for her; the bucket had been emptied to the last drop. People fought over it, Miss Justine tells her.

A face that is like the most beautiful flower is an expertly maintained face. Cleanliness is a virtue. To love beauty is to love virtues. Elida shampoo, and Effekta night cream with hormones just Ls 2.60; ivory combs and compacts.

Out!

It's an outhouse, not a train. No one has toilet paper. Who thinks about bodily functions, when you're being driven to slaughter.

The stench rises overhead. Over the sleeping livestock, the dreaming people – ta-da, ta-da, ta-da, ta-da, ta-da. Stomachs gurgle, eyes dry out. The sanatorium season in Baldone from 23 May to 15 September. They could still make it. Miss Justine goes every year. Sulphur, down, salt, pine extract, impregnated with carbonic acid, Pinoxygen, oxygen baths, down compresses. An outdoor basin in a dry pine forest. Children, country folk. Rules about recovery for rural residents. Government employees, disabled veterans, retirees and their family members -- all of them with fewer rules. Music every day in the well-house, and dances on Saturdays.

“An Indonesian chicken, right, ladies? A chicken roasted in its feathers! Take a young, inexperienced bird, chop off its head, gut it, but no matter what don't pluck it, just clean it. Fill it up with a lot of salt and pepper, two onion rings and then sew shut the openings. Then the prepared chicken will resemble a feathered ball. Then we slather it with mud and toss the ball onto some red-hot coals. Once it's turned black and starts to crackle, we know it's cooked. Then you have to take an axe and chop it open. Or throw it full-force against some rocks. And the chicken will come out without the feathers -- tender, juicy and pure like a baby. The feathers stay baked in the mud. This method can be used to cook any animal with fur or feathers.

“Shut it!”

“Let her talk!”

“The best onion-mash is at the restaurant Riga, on the corner of Dzirnava Street.”

“I'm about to turn you into madh!”

“I said shut it!”

“Daugava River salmon in cream, Carnikava lampray in jelly, peppered Mazirbe flounder with beer! Bowls of golden-brown chicken bake.

“Two pints and then that’s enough. My liver is aching in despair.”

“Maybe we should sing?”

“Our throats are parched.”

“I’ll sing of you, of you my fatherland!”

“Fine, sing, sing. The soldiers will answer with rifles, and then you’ll beg for mercy.”

“Let’s ask them to let us out! We need water! Baths! We’ll die from infections.”

“True enough. Let’s bang on the walls, all together! Give it all you’ve got.”

“And let’s chant -- *vodu, vodu, vodu!*”

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The train stopped several hours later. Someone counted twenty-two train cars. Someone else thinks they started with forty.

There’s a ditch, or stream, alongside the tracks with brown, marshy water. They’re let out in shifts. Three cars at a time. Guards with their guns raised. They stand together in a clump. Open space and thirty degrees. The air shimmers in the swelter. You can’t submerge yourself in the ditch or swim away. So they’ll just bathe. Let them stare at their naked behinds, let them snigger at the women’s breasts, which sway as they scrub their armpits, let them shout and shoot their guns, but they won’t go back into the train until they’ve drunk as much as their stomachs can handle, and until they’ve bathed as well as is possible. Lote makes sure that those who had

soap in their packs don't foam up the ditch, but bathe from the buckets. They follow her instruction.

The baby gurgles and fidgets, now that it's naked and free in Antonija's hands. The water is warm and not at all refreshing, but people drink like horses. Lote scrubs her skirt, wrings it out and puts it back on. She dunks her entire head into the ditch. When she stands back up, she sees that Antonija is holding the baby face-down in the water and isn't bringing it back up. She's forcing it down. On purpose! Her fragile shoulder blades sticking out like a chicken's. Lote shoves her to the ground and pulls the baby out of the water. Filipine, rolling her skirt back down, witnessed the entire scene. This time she keeps her mouth shut. Just glares silently. Then she approaches them and kicks Antonija in the side with her fat leg. Lote grabs the leg wrenches Filipine off to one side. Surprisingly, Filipine doesn't cry out.

"I could call you out right here, Antonija! And then they'd shoot you," Lote whispers. Her eyes burn like red-hot metal.

"Maybe that's what I want."

"Then drown yourself instead of killing your kid."

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Lote crawls into the train car and shuts her eyes. She'll sleep.

She doesn't have to get involved in everything. Who asked her to? No one. Filipine is right.

The soldiers shout that their time is up. *Po vagonam!* The people climb back in complaining and groaning.

The baby cries, hiccuping.

Lote can't take it. She takes the baby away from Antonija, wraps it in a rag and clutches it to her chest. Bogene, the little girl.

Antonija doesn't say anything. She's sitting again. Her crepe-like skirt is wet, her chin trembles.

"Miss Justine, do you have any drops? Antonija's is completely out of it"

"Iodine and Kalcek. And it's almost all gone. But good for you, Lote."

Even Filipine, putting up her wet hair, grimaces in agreement.

Military trains carrying armour roll past loudly. One after the other. They bake in the wagons, clamouring in the opposite direction.

"Must be war."

"Then they'll send us back."

"More likely they'll shoot us."

"The Germans will beat the Russians and we won't be left in Siberia!"

At night, however, they move on. It's a little cooler; the night air blows in through the cracks, and they fall asleep.

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Early next morning, when the train stops at yet another station, Lote sees a group of children dressed in sacks, their faces ashen and emaciated.

“They’re hoping that anyone passing by will throw some food out to them,” Miss Justine mutters quietly.

“I’ve got half a pack of sugar. Should I give it to them?”

“No,” Lote says, “let those going off to war feed them.”

The teacher pushes the bread crusts she’s collected out through the ceiling grate.

Antonija lies on the floor. No one has noticed the red stain under the hand hidden by the rosy crepe-like skirt. Right next to it is Lote’s mirror shard.

The great pissier, standing up from the bench, recites:

Their night is my day

And my life -- their slumber

And each of us is to them

A great and eternal debtor.