



HANA

Alena Mornštrajnová

My head is filled with fog. Sometimes it is impenetrably thick, so thick that it won't let a single thought shine through. This is the state I regard as happiness. But then the mist melts away and the images come back to haunt me. They beset me from every direction, there is no escaping them. Anxiety constricts my chest and my lungs gasp painfully for air.

Fear seizes my whole body and I stumble.

Figures begin to emerge from the mist. They are bright, much brighter than the world around me. They speak to me, yell at me, reproach me for being still here and remaining silent. But I can't talk about the dead. I want to put them to rest, at least in my memories.

How could I possibly talk about the anyway? Nobody would believe me. No one knows how much suffering a person can endure. That is what I tell them. I beg them, again and again, to leave me alone, or drag me off to join them in their world of shadows. But they won't. Not yet.

All I want from life is for it to release me from its clutches. Why does it insist on clinging to me so, when I have seen how readily it abandoned those who clung to it at all costs, those who had someone in this world that they cared about? And who cared about them. I have no one like that. At least, these were the thoughts that were going through my head as I stepped off the train and onto the platform at Meziříčí railway station.

It was high summer when I returned to my hometown. I had been perched on the wooden seat by the open window of the passenger train, eyes wide open, my luggage in my lap. I was holding on to my black canvas bag, pressing it to my body. Not because I was worried that someone might steal it. It held nothing of importance to me. A jumper and some underwear. I'd stuck the piece of paper meant to serve as my temporary ID into my pocket, next to my most prized possession, a slice of bread. I'd stuffed some more slices into the pockets of my cotton dress and the buttoned up black jacket that was two sizes too big for me, and patted the pockets from time to time to check they were still there. The countryside hurtled past the window, but I didn't take it in. The only thing I was aware of was the rhythmic sound of the wheels of the train taking me away. The jolting of the carriage and the

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rumble of the tracks took my thoughts back dangerously close to the days I never wanted to revisit but whose horror held me firmly in their grip, choking me. I felt I was sinking back in time. The interior of the carriage went dark, a sweetish smell tickled my nostrils and a lump formed in my throat. I gasped for air and clutched at my throat to push away the invisible hands trying to throttle me. I must have cried out because every eye in the carriage turned towards me in disapproval and a woman sitting near the aisle moved further away and lifted the little girl sitting between us into her lap.

The staring eyes of my fellow travellers brought me back to the present. The train was packed but the seat next to me remained empty. I edged closer to the window to make more room. Nobody took the seat. People were reluctant to sit close to a gaunt female in baggy clothes and men's ankle boots, bundled up in her coat in the middle of the summer. Perhaps they guessed where I was coming from, perhaps they caught a glimpse of the pain wracking me and didn't want to be tainted by it. The war was over after all, and the country was striding towards a bright future.

I looked around. The man in the sweat-stained blue shirt on the seat opposite looked away and gazed out of the window, while the others stared at the floor. I knew I wasn't pretty sight. I pulled the headscarf covering my scant white hair further down my forehead, reached for a piece of bread, stuck a bit of crust into my toothless mouth and let it slowly dissolve on my palate. The sweet-and-salty taste of the bread banished the ugly thoughts for a while and allowed me to sink back into a timeless mist.

The train squealed to a halt and people started pushing for the door. I raised my head in confusion.

'Meziříčí,' said the man opposite, sighing with relief when I moved over to the aisle, and stretched his legs out comfortably.

My body had grown stiff from several hours' sitting and my legs wouldn't obey me. I grabbed the door handle and tried to reach the step looming far down. My left knee buckled and I landed on my right foot from up high. There was a sharp, shooting pain in my swollen ankle. I tried to reach for the handle with my other hand and let the canvas bag drop onto the platform. Gingerly I lowered myself to the ground and bent down to pick up my bag, but the blood rushed to my head, I saw black and fall onto all fours. I didn't have the strength to get up so I crawled to the nearest bench and somehow scrambled up onto it. My muscles were shivering and I felt dizzy.

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‘Look at her, she must be drunk,’ remarked a young man with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth to his companion in high heels who looked around and gave an amused laugh. She might have been twenty-six – my age. She’s someone they would have sent to the left, I thought, reaching into my pocket for another crust of bread.

I stayed on the bench even after the dizzy spell subsided and my legs stopped trembling. I was in no hurry and wanted to keep the tiny flicker of hope alive for at least a little longer, the hope that our house in the Square was still standing, that I would climb the stone stairs to the first floor, enter our flat, breathe in its familiar smell, walk through the hallway to the kitchen and find my family sitting around the table. My mother Elsa, Grandma Greta, Grandpa Bruno and my little sister Rosa. That was my most ardent wish, but I knew it was a vain hope and the minute I entered our flat, the dream of a home would vanish forever, because the journey I had embarked on in the night of 14 September 1942 was a journey to hell.

Meziříčí, summer 1945

I straightened my feeble legs, stood up carefully and slowly left the station.

It was as if I was stepping into the painting that used to hang above the sofa in our living room. I recognized everything that I saw around me. The streets and the houses, the trees and the sky above. As I breathed in the familiar smell, I could feel the sun beating down on my face and the summer breeze lifting the corner of my headscarf. Sounds assaulted me on all sides. Car engines, the clicking of heels, subdued conversation, birdsong, and the rustling of leaves in the trees. Everything seemed familiar, yet completely strange. Because I was no longer part of the picture.

The town hadn’t change. Only I had change.

I trudged along the streets, my eyes fixed on the pavement. Every now and then I stopped to rest and look around this strange town where I was born twenty-six years ago. People skirted around me, some indifferent, others irritated. They must have wonder who this weird woman was, dawdling in the middle of the pavement, getting in their way. in the old days I would have found that upsetting. Now I didn’t care.

I tugged the headscarf further down my forehead and forced myself to take another step. Take one more step and don’t think of what comes next. This had been my credo for all of the past three years.

I reached the delicatessen where I used to stop for a cream puff and a chat with Ivana before the war, before she became Mrs Horáčková. I used to be

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very fond of her. She had been a bubbly girl who felt she should seize with both hands all that life had to offer. And that was precisely what she did.

But now I had no wish to think of what had happened before... When was it? In a past life? And who did it happen to?

I needed a rest. Outside the delicatessen there were two tables with red-and-white chequered tablecloths and some wooden chairs. An elderly lady was sitting at one of them with a little boy who was kicking his legs about happily and licking his ice cream. I sat down at the other table, rested my sore feet and put my bag on the other chair.

‘Can I help you?’

It took me a while to realize that a woman in an apron was talking to me. I looked up. Mašková or Pašková her name was. The owner of the delicatessen. She knew my mother and had always asked to be remembered to her. *Give my regards to your mother, Hana...*

The woman still bore the same courteous expression, but the tone of her voice had changed. She positioned herself so that the other customers at the outside tables and inside the shop couldn't see us and hissed: ‘If you're not having anything, please leave.’

I was exhausted and by now accustomed to being set away. I continued to stare at the table. Mašková or Pašková grabbed my bag and dumped it in my lap. ‘Please go. You can't sit here. You're driving my customers away.’

‘Water,’ I said.

‘Water? We don't serve water here. Only lemonade. Would you like some lemonade?’

I nodded and Mašková or Pašková turned on her heels, annoyed, and slipped into her shop. The little boy at the next table had split ice cream on his shirt and his grandmother was cleaning it up with a handkerchief. Then she spat on it and wiped the boy's face. I got up and continued walking to the Square.

I walked past a pub that was reeking of cigarette smoke, beer and urine and was full of regulars even now, early in the afternoon, then I turned right, crossed the road by the pharmacy and headed to the river. For the past two hundred years, a stone statue of St Valentine had stood on shoulder. He must have been waiting for my return and now wondered if it really was me, surprised to see me walk so slowly, hesitantly, and on my own.



Across the river the town came into view. It hadn't changed at all. The trees, the Karáseks' tall house, as bland and cold as their owners, the castle walls with their flaking plaster. The bridge itself was the only reminder of the recent war. On one side it was missing a chunk of pavement and the balustrade. As if a huge whale had bitten into it, ripping a piece out of it before diving back into the sea. The wound had been temporarily dressed with wooden planks and some boards had been prepared for plastering over the cracks.

The bridge is just a few dozen meters from the Square. I hobbled up the hill with leaden steps. It had never seemed so steep before. And then, all of a sudden, there it was. Our house. It was standing there as if nothing had happened. I took a few more steps and looked up at the first floor. I even recognised the curtains, why, they were the ones I had myself crocheted in a pattern Grandma Greta had taught me. One window was slightly open. What could that mean? For a brief moment I believed a miracle had happened.

I pressed down the handle of the front door but it was locked. I walked past the sparkling clean shop window with its display of summer wares and went to the stationer's. It was empty, only the bell above the door made a tingling noise, summoning the shop assistant.

I knew it wouldn't be my mother who'd appear behind the counter, but even so, when I saw Mr Urbánek, I got a lump in my throat and my knees started to shake. I planted my elbows on the counter, put my forehead against the wooden board and burst into tears. I wept aloud, sobbing and moaning, gasping for air and stuttering incoherently. Mr Urbánek was saying something but I couldn't take it in. Suddenly a chair materialised behind me, Mr Urbánek detached my hands from the counter and made me sit down. I was trembling all over, but my sobbing was now silent. I wiped my wet cheeks on my jacket sleeve.

“Are you all right, madam? Do you want me to call someone?”

I sniffed and raised my head. Mr Urbánek's face turned from curiosity to shock and, finally, sympathy. “Miss Hana...” he said, and tears welled up in his eyes as he looked at me. Perhaps I could have fooled myself that he was weeping for joy at seeing me, but I knew that these were tears of grief and horror. Horror at the way I looked.

Although by then I had put on twenty kilos, I was still fifteen kilos below my weight before the war. At the time I didn't know that I would never put that weight back on. I just can't help it. Even if I had any appetite, which I don't, my stomach can't take very much. Whenever I feel weak, I stick a piece of

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bread into my mouth, roll it around my tongue and swallow it very slowly. It does me good and also helps to calm me down. I always keep some bread handy – in my pockets, in drawers, even under my pillow.

By now my hair had stopped falling out but it grew back totally white, with some bald patches. The doctor had said it would get thicker again but would probably stay white forever. As if it made any difference.

What would have made some difference was if I were able to move my fingers again.

The joints in my fingers were swollen much more than in my legs and arms. But Mr. Urbánek couldn't have seen that and that is why I think that what terrified him most was my toothless mouth, my gaunt cheeks, and my eyes. My eyes had seen so much that they had sunk deep, deep inside their sockets and were buried under the heavy lids.

“Miss Hana...”

Yes, there was once a time when I was Miss Hana. But then I became a Star of David, transport number 79, a resident of Terezín and finally a six-figure number in Auschwitz.