

# Ivana Djilas: Can You For Once Shut Up

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

*to my boys, Kolja, Ruben and Boštjan*

## the speech

When then they say, damn southerners, that's me.

When they say, shoot the migrants, they are thinking of me, I am an economic migrant.

When they say black, I am the mother of a black child.

When they start sending away all those whose native language is not Slovene, that is also me.

When they are afraid of other religions, I think to myself, that's not me, after all, I am an atheist, but I come from a family of communists and partisans, so, yes... that too is me.

When they talk of parasitical artists, that, once again, is me.

When they threaten gays and lesbians, that isn't me, I'm not a lesbian... but my child could be gay – so, yes... that too is me.

When they don't like educated and liberal women – I am a woman in a 'manly' profession.

When they say fat bitch, that is also me.

I am all of those things, and you are also. And tomorrow it could easily be them.

Even when I pretend that I am none of these things. That I don't hear.

When I don't want to stand here before you, involved in all this.

When I don't want to be brave and expose myself.

When I would simply like to live, coexist in peace.

I am all of them: a southerner, a migrant, black, a mother, a socialist, a lesbian, an atheist, an artist, a feminist, a temping worker, a liberal.

And today I am also brave. Because I am forced to be.

*Speech at demonstrations against the politics of hatred (31 May 2018)*

## how you become an emigrant

In 1993 Serbia was under an international embargo. Hyperinflation was rampant. We would buy petrol in plastic coke bottles out in the street, four Deutschmarks per litre, and everything else on the black market, smuggled in from Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania. Who would have thought in the 1970s and 80s that we would go to Timișoara for food? We changed foreign currency into dinars in coins because if you used the larger paper banknotes, the five billion dinars you got for five marks had lost all their value before you had a chance to spend it. We closed cinemas. We closed post offices and banks for international transactions. We closed the airports. In winter they heated our flats to five degrees centigrade, simply so the piping wouldn't burst. We had electricity for eight hours a day (if they didn't happen to forget to switch it on). We brought all kinds of things to hospitals from our homes, from sheets and needles to anaesthetics. You would wait for the local bus in town for an hour or more, and when it finally arrived, it was impossible to push your way onto it and you had to sometimes hang through the door that couldn't close. Even ambulances, firemen and TV crews couldn't afford petrol. It was probably why they talked so much shit on TV. Yes, in 1993 it was not really hard to comprehend that almost everywhere else in the world things were better than in Serbia.

At the time I was in my second year of the elite experimental Belgrade Veljko Vlahović Mathematical Grammar School with classes of twenty pupils at the most and regular lectures by guest professors from technical universities. In order to be accepted, you had to pass a special entry exam. I later discovered that maths wasn't really my thing, evident by the fact that I now work as a theatre director. But I was surrounded by peers who kept attending international competitions and winning at Olympiads for maths, physics, chess, astronomy, programming and similar not-exactly-simple sciences. Their families were also generally well educated, usually scientifically or technically orientated. That year we didn't often go out; even if the entire class would pool what little money we had in our pockets, we could not afford to buy even a small can of coke. On Fridays, however, we would often go to Slavija.

Slavija is one of the larger squares in Belgrade, a kind of traffic roundabout. We would go there to wave at the busses leaving for Budapest airport (the closest airport to Belgrade that could be reached without a visa) whenever one of our classmates and all their family were leaving – the lucky ones who were able to obtain immigrant visas for Canada, Australia or any other country. And those whose parents were rich enough to send them for further studies to the United States. They got away. They were leaving forever. By then I had already fully mastered waving and crying goodbyes.

Two years previously, on New Year's Day in 1991, I stood in the parking area of our block of flats in Novi Beograd, waving to my father who, with a small truck loaded up with everything he owned, was leaving with his second wife (a Slovene) and my half-brother to go and live in Ljubljana. After a year of serious emotional stress my father gave up, resigned from his post as vice-president of the investment and development board at the then elite company Jugoexport, and left. He was not really convinced he was doing the right thing, but investment in a country under an economic embargo and with war raging all around it didn't make much sense. Two years later we were grateful that he had left because he was also able to save us. Father with money sent from Slovenia and Grandpa with food packages from the rural northern province of Vojvodina.

As I said, in 1993 almost anywhere was better than Serbia, so it was not really important where you were moving to, as long as you could get out. Emigrating from Serbia was no longer a matter of choice but chance and luck. With my mother being single, merely secondary school education and no good command of foreign languages, we had no chance of obtaining an immigrant visa for anywhere, so there was little point in trying to scrape together the 150 dollars needed to apply. We didn't fall into the desired category for any country. Fortunately, I had one trump card up my sleeve – a father in Slovenia. The following years were troublesome. We protested a great deal, went on strike, made a lot of noise with saucepan lids, swore at the TV, fought among ourselves, blew whistles, were embarrassed (at least some of us), were afraid, companies collapsed, we worked a little, we were worried about our existence, gave angry statements for world media, learned what tear gas was and at certain times passionately believed that some things were actually about to

change. Fortunately, we had a known enemy – half of Serbia had ‘Slobo’, the other half had ‘the entire world.’ All the time we believed that we had ‘reached rock bottom’ and that ‘things can’t get worse.’ And the years went by. The world moved on, leaving us behind. By the beginning of my fourth year, there were only eight of us left in our class. Friends who had left had already created new lives for themselves in other languages.

Then came 1999. In the wake of the NATO bombing of Serbia, I looked at the broken glass in the windows of the building of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade stuck in place with wide tape and I thought to myself: I have just graduated from the Arts Faculty, I have no work experience whatsoever, I don’t really even know how to direct a play, what chances are there that I get a job in the theatre or any other kind of paid work in Serbia? I tried to imagine how long Serbia would need under ideal circumstances to pull itself out of this shit. The five, ten or fifteen years would mean throughout my twenties and thirties. Time I did not have. Don’t get me wrong, I loved Serbia (at the time we still called it Yugoslavia but that’s another story), at least the one we constantly longed for, and I liked life before the crisis, the crisis we were now waiting to return. But I also had the feeling that this new Serbia, now so used to existing in a crisis, no longer liked me. Perhaps these words are too harsh, perhaps it merely didn’t need me. I pulled my trump card out of my sleeve and left. I had little choice. At the time I left Serbia in 1999, it was said that 360 thousand people had emigrated from Serbia (without Kosovo Serbia had around five million inhabitants). It is not enough to say that this is over seven percent of the population, what is also important is that this number concerned a very specific group of citizens: highly educated young people with young children, people from mixed marriages, those with specific skills and specific jobs, the best researchers, the best professors, doctors, architects, computer whizzes, cooks, and their likes. The composition of the Serbian population changed. Slowly, Friday after Friday, a worrying number of people were leaving from Slavija Square, people who could get Serbia back on its feet. People who had other opportunities took them up, all 360 thousand of them.

This way I never created Serbian culture but a Slovene one. I spent quite a few years visiting the immigration office. Initially I had a refugee visa, then a tourist

one, a student one a number of times, and a network one; eventually I gained Slovene citizenship based on Article 13 of the Citizenship of the Republic of Slovenia Act, due to 'benefits to the state', the same article used to grant citizenship to football players. With time I stopped reading two sets of news and began getting annoyed exclusively with Slovene politics. I was happy with my choice. Even when the crisis began in Slovenia, the conditions were not comparable with those I had already experienced. Here only 'a better life' is in the game, without any war in the background. And then, all of a sudden, *déjà vu*.

I am listening to the same sentences as twenty years ago: We have reached rock bottom. Things can't get worse. We need to find out who is responsible. Will we allow ourselves to be led by criminals? Europe wants to enslave us. Young people have no prospects. We have a new brain drain. The crisis will soon be over. We just need to be patient. There is nothing else for us here. Anywhere else is better.

Every time I switch on the TV I see some intelligent, modern young woman asking the State whether it is worth investing for twenty or more years in her schooling if it then does not know what to do with her. And angry, no longer young, student reps who are negotiating with the state over the hopeless measures to encourage youth employment. The same words linger in the air: Or do we have to go elsewhere? We will move away! At least those of us who have the chance! Who have the money! At least the best of us! And nobody does anything. Everyone is waiting. With horror I recognise the delusion that 'after the crisis' things will take off from where they had stalled, return to their old path. I want to shout out, 'They never return to what they were! It is still a long way to rock bottom! I don't want to leave again. I can go no further.'

The problem with crises is that they last. And life, if we allow ourselves to admit it or not, is a limited category. Those six, ten or nineteen years of political and economic crisis that will go down in history as 'the economic crisis of the early 21st century,' will for some people represent their entire lives. When the crisis in Serbia began, my mother was thirty-seven; when it ended (meaning when we sent Milošević to the Haag Tribunal in 2002), she was forty-nine and 'written off.' The New Serbia was starting anew with new people. Does that all sound familiar to you? New faces, no baggage, afresh, different? There is another problem with crises.

When matters finally take a better turn, not everything improves at the same time: low-skilled workers, artists, the disabled, the unemployed and the young at the start of their careers will not emerge from the crisis together with those who are healthy, strong, and those on the right side. The main problem is that you never really know whether things afterwards will genuinely be better. Of course you can say that we have a duty to fight for our own country and do something ourselves to make things better. But each one of us can also realistically weigh their chances, and if they have a choice – choose. In my Serbia, it was not hard to decide, but it still took me eight years to leave. It is not simple to abandon a country that ‘belongs’ to you and start persuading the Finns, for example, that they really need you. No parent really wants to grow old alone and see their children twice a year. Nobody dreams of not being able to understand their own grandchildren who will talk Dutch or Finnish. We all wish to belong, be part of something, see the fruits of our labour. For everyone, their first homeland is their first choice. And a good question is when does this State finish being a choice for someone? When is enough? How much waiting can one afford? What triggers a wave of migration?

Back then, in 1993, I conducted an interview with the Serbian playwright Aco Popović after the premiere of his play *The Night is Dark* which for the first time in the history of Serbian theatre looked at the subject of emigration, and I asked him what he thought about young people leaving to go abroad. He said, ‘It’s right that they go and see the world, and they then return.’ None of us have returned.

## a love story

This will be a love story, I promise. It just needs a little context. On my fifteenth birthday, 25 June 1991, the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia fell apart. This caused me quite a few identity problems in the next period of my life. For the first fifteen years of my life I had been a proud Yugoslav. For the next twelve, I was a disgraced citizen of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. For a while then *persona non grata* of the state called Serbia and Montenegro, and eventually just Serbia. I was a refugee, a foreign student, a migrant without the right paperwork, a *gastarbeiter*,

and in the end a proud migrant and citizen of the Republic of Slovenia. Even for a long while after this, I felt uneasy whenever people asked me where I was from. I internalized my childhood response, that I was from Yugoslavia, a Yugoslav, and that the language I speak is Serbo-Croatian. That I am a Serb from Serbia who speaks Serbian sounded unnatural to me. As if I had suddenly become an extremist nationalist. I simply couldn't utter it. I had the sense that I was betraying the idea of a common country which I loved, which I was proud of and with which I had identified myself for most of my life. Not to even mention religion. Everyone in our family was atheist, or rather, nobody paid any attention to religion. But all of a sudden, people around me *en masse* began to declare their religious affiliations and claim that they had always been religious, only they had suppressed their feelings. I found it hard to believe. I am even surprised by my own mother who seems to have found some new spirituality.

So, until my fifteenth birthday when the country fell apart right in front of my eyes, I knew precisely who I was: I was a girl from Belgrade. Inhabitant of the capital city and the largest city in the country who occasionally went on family visits to Ljubljana, the very small capital city of Slovenia where my step-mother was from. And these visits involved sitting inside a VW Golf IV without air conditioning, driving along the Road of Brotherhood and Unity past Zagreb to the outskirts of Ljubljana where I tried not to die of boredom. But after that birthday, everything changed. All of a sudden Ljubljana became a true capital city. Slovenia was no longer only part of a country but a country in its own right. You could not reach it along the Road of Brotherhood and Unity anymore because that involved crossing another new country, Croatia, which would not agree with you doing so. All of a sudden this journey in the VW Golf IV no longer took seven hours but nineteen, through Hungary, along village roads made for tractors that had never been intended for mass traffic.

When my father and step-mother decided that they would move permanently to Ljubljana – not Ljubljana itself but a house in Sostro in the eastern suburbs of the capital – I truly believed they were mad. Let me tell you what Sostro was like in the early 90s. We can start with the fact that there was no street lighting and when I woke up in the middle of the night in my room above the garage, I did

not know where I was. It was pitch black. I would have to plug in the children's night light to even find my way round the room. When I looked out of the window in the morning I saw a field of corn. The bus into Ljubljana ran only hourly. I was six and a half kilometres away from the Triple Bride in the centre of town and I didn't even have a bicycle. The ring road around Ljubljana was still being built and the fog was sometimes so thick that the bus had to stop, one of the passengers get out and show the driver the way. To a teenage girl from Belgrade the village of Sostro seemed like the end of the world. I didn't want to move there not even in my dreams. War or no war. Above all, we were also all convinced that this nonsense with the embargo and isolation of Yugoslavia would end at any moment. But, as is often the case, the situation was not resolved but became more complicated. Very soon we also needed visas if we wanted to travel anywhere. At the time I had started coming to Slovenia on a tourist visa. In Ljubljana my family then had to register me with the police within 24 hours of my arrival as a guest from abroad. Once we even had to pay a fine, not an insignificant amount, because we were six hours late with the registration. This went on for years, up until I finished my secondary school and my studies at the Academy. I continued to live in Belgrade, waiting for things to normalise. I realised that as student of stage direction I would have difficulties finding a job in a theatre if I were to emigrate. My best chances were in Belgrade. But the problem was that my Belgrade was vanishing. Sometime towards the end of my fourth year at the Academy everything finally collapsed. They had bombed me and I had had enough. I had no need to become a victim or a hero, all I wanted was to live. With twenty Deutschmarks left in my pocket I realised I would soon not have enough for basic food. And that twenty marks was enough for me to get to the border and wait for my father to come from Slovenia to collect me. For twenty marks the taxi driver took me from Novi Sad to the Serbian-Hungarian border. Because of NATO planes we left early in the morning because, the driver wanted to be back before night time. I crossed the border on foot. I arrived in Hungary, sat on a wall next to the pavement and waited. Once again the VW Golf IV came to collect me and Father and I went to the Embassy of Slovenia in Budapest to get a visa. I felt guilty for leaving and saving my own arse. I even left my mother in Belgrade. We arrived at the Embassy at about six in the morning and were by far not the first. There was already

a queue at the high metal fence. Some had brought stools with them, clearly used to waiting at fences. And we waited there for hours and hours, for the Embassy to open, for others to do what they came to do, for the staff's lunchbreak to end, for someone to call someone who would vouch for me, for them to take pity on me. After many hours my turn came. We were served from a window on the outside of the building, I was not even allowed inside. Finally I had arrived at my destination and looked at myself in the mirror. Literarily. The glass between me and the official was tinted with a reflective foil. I was talking to myself. Fortunately, the person who phoned on my behalf was important enough. I was granted a three-month refugee visa. Thinking about it, I arrived in Slovenia as a refugee, even though I didn't feel like one. And if my step-mother had not had a large house, a well-paid job in IBM, and a very influential son-in-law, I would not have been granted that visa. And I would not be here today. No, we don't all have the same opportunities. I also had in my pocket a three-months tourist visa for the United States. This too I had obtained through acquaintances and connections. But I knew that if I went to America, I would never finish my studies, I would never work in the theatre, and once my visa had expired, I would not be able to return. I would probably end up working as an illegal worker in some petrol station or at a bakery owned by some kind Serb. Every year I would take my chances to try and get a green card or I would try and marry someone for citizenship. So I preferred to take Slovenia. Despite Sostro. Despite the field of corn and the fog.

To my surprise, things in Ljubljana were changing for the better. Apart from this I also met the theatre director and playwright Dušan Jovanović who offered me a post-graduate place at the Academy for Theatre, Radio, Film and Television in Ljubljana. All I needed was to sort out two minor issues: the fees for my studies, because I was considered a foreign student, and proof of having successfully completed my undergraduate course at the Academy in Belgrade. Both seemed completely impossible. The fees for a foreign student at the Academy in Ljubljana for the specific two-year course were 20,000 marks. Apart from this, at that moment it was not possible to graduate in Serbia because the Academy had just been bombed. Despite this, I somehow managed it. I passed my outstanding exams in Belgrade with the lowest possible grade, paid my fellow students fifty marks each to work with me

on a performance over the summer, and then graduated at the destroyed academy. My father borrowed the money to pay for the first instalment of the fees, I was given a student visa, and moved to Ljubljana. Nobody really knew what exactly I was supposed to be doing on the course. I was their first foreign student and they had not yet put together a study programme. I attended lessons that were not really intended for me. I did all kinds of jobs to pay for my fees. A lifesaver was the Soros Foundation that paid for part of my second-year fees. I was immensely lonely. I had the feeling that it didn't matter at all whether I got out of bed in the morning or not. But despite everything, I persisted, stubbornly visiting theatres, presenting myself as a director.

Two years passed. My student visa had expired. I could not get a work visa because I was not insured, and I could not pay social insurance because I didn't have a visa. For about half a year I went round in circles. I could also not obtain citizenship through my father and step-mother because I was already over 18. My only chance was to request citizenship on the basis of the famous Article 13, 'based on special interests of the state'. I would need to prove how I could be useful to the country, yet I was only at the start of my career. Despite this, people were very helpful; I got references from everyone I had ever collaborated with, from the Director of the Slovene National Theatre Drama, from Professor Dušan Jovanović, from the chief editor of Pop-TV, from the Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, from the Drama School, the Dean of the Academy, anyone I could think of. But a few months after I had submitted my application for citizenship, I still had no official answer. I found out that the Ministry of Culture had given a positive recommendation and that now my application was waiting for someone in the government to take pity on me. But no. This is a discretionary procedure that is carried out whenever the government sees fit to do so. Nobody is obliged to give an explanation for their decision and there is no process of appeal. It's a legal loophole. And I was trying to push through this loophole. Every day I waited for the official notice to come that I would need to leave the country.

My father, at the end of his tether with the whole thing, like a true Serb went to a coffee shop owned by some fellow Serb and began complaining to all the Serbian-Montenegrin immigrants who happened to be gathered there about all the

things his hard-working, incredibly talented daughter who any country could only wish for was going through. His complaints were heard by Aco the waiter, probably for hours on end, perhaps not even for the first time. And Aco the waiter had a brilliant idea, 'Hey, we have a lady come in for lunch once a week who works at the Ministry for the Interior. Her daughter runs a photo studio close by and every Wednesday they come here for lunch. I will ask her what can be done.' And he did, he asked her. The very following Wednesday. He handed her a scrap of paper with my name and surname written on it.

And her story is this. As Aco the waiter was serving her and her daughter lunch, he asked her in passing whether she might perhaps be able to help a genius, wonderful girl, the daughter of his best friend who is also a wonderful, educated person like few others. He told her that for months the girl had been on the verge of being thrown out of Slovenia. But that she has nowhere to go. She can't return to Serbia because she is a great artist and there is nothing for her to do there. That she, the lady, herself a mother of an artist, will surely understand. And the girl on the scrap of paper, me that is, is truly hard-working and has done so many things here in Slovenia that everyone, from her professor to the director of the theatre and television has written recommendations for her. And all she can do now is wait and hold her breath. She is very worried that she might be deported. With these words Aco the waiter handed the lady the scrap of paper with my name and surname.

And indeed, back at work the lady finds the cupboard that held all the applications with surnames starting with a D. She finds my file. A wonderful plastic, modern, blue file and in it pages printed out on a coloured printer, marked with colourful tags. Each page in a plastic display folder, everything checked and neatly arranged. So neat and well-arranged that the lady takes out the file and goes to show her colleagues just how orderly and nicely it is all filed. Not like most others that scribble out the application by hand with barely legible writing. And such beautiful Slovene. And what a great girl she seems in the photo, gazing intelligently through those glasses. Apparently the file became for years later an example of how a correct application for citizenship should be presented.

So the lady takes my file and finds her boss, the Inspector General. She knocks on his door, enters his office and tells him she needs a favour. It is about a

child. Just look at this file, how neat everything is. And her boss asks her, 'Where do you know her from?' Of course, she can't tell him that a waiter in a bar asked her to look into the application of some girl he knew, so instead she tells him, 'She's the daughter of my lover.' Everyone laughs at her joke but my file stays on the Inspector's desk. It was the moment I managed to make the most incredible move, I came out of the cupboard, into the light onto the right desk. From here on, everything was easier. I need to mention that at the time Slovenia was just entering the European Union and that there was pressure on the state administration to get rid of much bureaucracy that had been stuck in cupboards. What can I say? I was lucky. I was granted citizenship in less than a year. They didn't send me back.

For the ceremony of handing over citizenship I was invited to the building of the Ministry of the Interior on Beethoven Street in Ljubljana. You can probably imagine the solemn ceremony, singing the national anthem, my hand on my heart as I repeat the oath to my new country. There was none of that. I waited in the queue at the counter for them to call someone from upstairs. A woman came, gave me a piece of paper to sign and handed me the official printed positive decision on my citizenship. That was all. I stepped out into Beethoven Street and expected something spectacular, something magnificent. After all these years of changing countries and visas and standing at fences and counters with reflective tints pasted over windows, I had become a citizen of Slovenia. I stared in disbelief at the piece of paper that would make my life so much easier. Now I will be able to travel almost anywhere without a visa, with just my ID card. And as I stared at that precious life-changing piece of paper, I realised that they had made a mistake. They had misspelt my name. I could just see disaster in the making. So I went back. The man at reception looked at me, 'Have you forgotten something?' No, no, noooo, I've come to return my citizenship. The citizenship I had only had for five minutes. It took a while to sort out and I had to return a second time for the certificate. This time everything was in order. Though I would have kept the paper regardless of how my name would have been written. Since then, for the last twelve years, my status hasn't changed: A citizen of the Republic of Slovenia, a citizen of the European Union. Boring as hell.

My endlessly grateful and traditionally brought-up father asked Aco the waiter for another favour. When that lady came in next for her Wednesday lunch, could he tell her that he would like to thank her in person and he would be immensely happy if she would agree to meet him. And she did. He wrapped up a hand-made scarf woven by his first wife, my mother, and he bought a bunch of flowers. Perhaps he didn't buy flowers but I fancy that he did. Out of caution she had arranged with her daughter, the one with the photographic studio, to call her exactly twenty minutes into the meeting, just in case the gentleman would be too annoying and she would need an emergency exit. And so they met. On a Wednesday. Father was endlessly grateful and polite. And the lady had always liked gentlemen with white beards and glasses, so when her daughter called twenty minutes into their meeting she dismissed her. And the gentleman and she ordered lunch. Aco the waiter brought them drinks. And the gentleman gave her the present woven by hand by his former wife. The end. Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you: the lady has for the last ten years been married to my father. I did promise you a love story, didn't I?