Lucija Stepančič: Out of Nowhere

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

Part 1 LILI

1

I would never have imagined that the garden behind that wall could be so large. And beautiful. Even though I walked past more than once every day. Now Suzana had finally rung the bell and the door that opened slowly like some dramatic moment in a film, revealed behind it an entirely new world.

'Be careful what you say,' she hissed at me. 'And make sure you don't tell.'

As usual, I responded with a single syllable that could mean anything. Only that now I was also trying very hard to hide my amazement at the vast and expertly trimmed flowering vines and bushes I didn't at the time know were called wisteria (purple flowers) or jasmine (white). Alongside the perfect boxwood globes planted in simple clay pots standing effectively in a row. In 1981 the only horticulture that a kid of my kind could possibly know were bean poles in front of makeshift garden sheds on allotments and the trampled lawn in front of school. Perhaps also the occasional straggly begonia in concrete flower troughs next to parking lots. The only paradise garden was the one in the illustrated edition of the Bible, and even there it was Adam and Eve who drew most attention, even though fig leaves, as if by chance and very conveniently, covered the most interesting parts of their bodies. Now here is all this green, flowering profusely, a joy for the eyes. Unless I was even more charmed by the villa, of which I had until now only ever seen the roof, all of a sudden standing before me, apparently belonging to another era if not another world entirely. The distinctly stately building dazzled me through its windows that looked more like framed pictures than wall openings, finally enchanting me with its orangery that I spotted in the midst of all the greenery. Even Suzi, who had clearly been invited here before, seemed affected. Her voice had changed entirely and she was eyeing me with unrelenting severity, trying to appear adult and worldly. By the time we reached the end of the paved path leading up to the front door, she had transformed into

someone I didn't know. Irena, whom I remembered from primary school, awaited us at the door holding a couple of glasses. It seems she was the one living here (who would have thought), was celebrating her birthday and was already a little tipsy. She jingled the ice cubes theatrically and, keeping up with the ice in the glass, even danced around a little herself. An attempt to show her dissipated streak. 'Oh, my younger brother had to come along, my folks are a drag,' said Suzi with fake nonchalance, looking away. Irena, also pretending not to notice that I was in fact two years older than they were, pulled a face and let us know that her younger brother was also at home, and that we would manage somehow. That was it, they agreed that younger siblings and old folk, these two indecent types of people, would not be mentioned again. Irena handed me the cocktail intended for my sister. They grabbed each other by the arm and went into the house to get another one. What she also did was light a cigarette, pretending to be hopelessly addicted. But at least she didn't start coughing, like so many of the other kids around.

It was as if I was pushing into a bourgeois lair, similar to those we were told about at school, exploiters and enemies of the people. But at that moment what was important for survival was to hide the fact that I was basically a chaperone, here exclusively at Mother's request, and once again I had not known how to say no to her. According to her, I was more than adequate for warding off rapists who might start stalking my chubby sister on the half-a-kilometre-long way to her schoolfriend's party. To be honest, I could not imagine how anyone might be so drastically excited about her; to me she didn't seem worthy of sin or prison. But Mother was clearly of a different opinion, her daughter's chubby arse was, without any sense or aesthetic criteria, apparently irresistibly attractive, as in the animal world. And it was mating season, May. Of course Mother did not wait for an answer, putting me into the role of knight protector was an order.

The cocktail was ridiculously sweet and on top of that decorated with a pathetic slice of lemon. Not even a trace of the Cynar thar my teacher mother discretely poured herself in the evenings and which was undoubtedly also a favourite of her teacher colleagues. The girls had got drunk on it at our place quite a few times, not too

drunk, but still. With the only things I ever managed to obtain from our drinks cabinet at home (well, a part of the cupboard in the living room), being sour, sharp or bitter in some way, just like life itself, the aroma of wormwood, herb and juniper brandies, and uncle's Sunday plonk, it was not difficult to swear that I would never, never ever become a drunkard. The whisky and cognacs I knew from films were only available in the forms of imitation brands that, as I had learned firsthand a long time ago, merely made you vomit. As far as beer goes, it was well known it makes you lazy and fat, so I thought it would be something I might consider at the age of forty or even older. Drinking thus repulsed me, even if I did appreciate giggly teachers who seemed to show their human side when in this state. I would not have any objections if they came sloshed to school every day. Although in their inebriated state they did flirt with my old man, embarrassing him, saying he was a cutie. A cutie? Him? Cuter with every glass?

And now history was threatening to repeat itself with me. Though the girls triumphantly pouring out of the house reminded me of a bunch of kids trying to get drunk by licking jam, I could distinctly smell danger. Out of nowhere appeared the feeling that they were capable of many things and were, beside this, also entirely unpredictable. I could not even imagine what would happen were they to somehow suss out that I was mummy's good boy who goes to music lessons to please his parents and knows how to play *Ballade Pour Adeline* like Richard Clayderman himself. And what if, perish the thought, they found out I was still a virgin?

I still remembered most of the playfully inebriated sixteen-year-old girls running all over the place from school, from their first year on (when I was in the third year). Now they were trying to create an atmosphere of elegant decadence. As if, until a short while ago, they had all been reading Konsalik, describing with such delightful pedantry the sinful parties of German high society. In secret I too loved to read about the debauchery of industrialists in their villas behind high walls. I used to snitch novels like that from Mother, even though I swore I would educate myself in high literature and had already read twenty-seven out of our collection of one hundred novels of world literature. In none did I find anything about what to do if you find yourself in a strange house full of drunken schoolgirls. Only one of the

classics ever experienced anything similar, Orpheus, and the drunken women ripped him apart without even knowing what they were doing.

Suzana kept appearing and disappearing in the persistently and ever-increasing noise, and even though she was more inebriated every time I looked at her, she somehow maintained a relaxed air. I did not know her this way. Surely she hasn't grown up without me noticing? How could I have forgotten that, on expeditions such as these, we usually get lost before we reach the local kindergarten? And, even stranger, how could Suzana have forgotten? Did she really want me to see her fooling around, later to pretend to our parents that we were at some childish birthday party with a cake, candles, and various aunts? Why should she even put up with me here if she doesn't care how I will take all this? And immediately came the answer, although not exactly in an angelic tongue.

'Suzi will get as pissed as a pig today,' I heard a neighing voice behind my back. It was a girl I remembered as the former President of the Union of Pioneers, a neighbour from a family of fanatical communists. I recalled the times when she used to give me a hard time out in the street, even then a head taller than I, because I used to go to catechesis and took the sacrament of confirmation. Now here she was saying, 'Are you man enough to carry her home?' She almost threw up as she laughed and he-hawed, spattering enough saliva for all the Soviet Republics. What would Marx have said, were he to see her right now? Probably what any other classic Marxist would say. Probably not that it is incredible how much she has grown since then. And even though she has elongated into a bit of a horse, she was in some way even attractive.

I must have been a quite inebriated myself, for looking at her brought to mind some kind of equestrian form of sexuality. She must have read my mind as she quickly disappeared, with a reactionary fear. Surely sex before marriage is not a deadly sin with communists? I decided I would pretend to be drunker that I really was just in case any of the other girls were to sense my lusty glances. But they didn't. Clearly the President of the Union of Pioneers was the most enthusiastic. None of the others even noticed that I would know very well what to do with them. All of a sudden it was also clear to me that such is probably different with each girl. But with

horror I also thought of the possibility that perhaps it is clear from afar that I have never been with any girl.

By the time I felt that the mood behind me had changed, it was already too late. Everything had somehow became less noisy, a lot more tense. Even the cigarette smoke thickened. The girls were clearly waiting for something. Definitely something I didn't have a clue about, all I noticed was that they had been waiting for a little too long and that they were slowly getting bored, like a flock of young hens. Until a thin voice, squeaking with laughter, said, 'Let's tickle him!' And they all came right at me, knocked me to the ground, and fell on top of me from every direction. Their hands were suddenly everywhere, or almost everywhere. Until one of the youngest, the most childish (a cute dumb creature), the one who fell straight into my lap, jumped away and was instantly sober. At that point the others also realised what was probably going on and fled. And anyway, Irena was already looking at them sternly from the top of the stairs, 'Let's go! It's ready!'

Scared off as they had been by me, they didn't need any further encouragement, and the stampede this time moved upwards, towards the mysterious row of elegant white doors, dignifiedly closed, clearly waiting for them. Certainly not for me. It did not even occur to me that I might follow them although I did not particularly fancy being left alone all of a sudden. Irena, who seemed to have acquired a trace of manners, gazed at me from her pulpit on the landing without too much contempt or pity. 'You can go into the living room, there is plenty of everything there, make yourself comfortable, feel at home, will you?' Behind her, the doors, one by one, closed surprisingly quietly and all was silent, interrupted only here and there by muffled nervous laughter that sounded as if it was coming from far away.

2

The living room with its tall, glazed doors looked out onto the garden. It was now totally dark outside. Another scene I knew only from films, like the deliberate swirling of the glass of whisky clinking the ice cubes. In silence I imagined a

bourgeois, probably industrialist family who in their grandiose design had wanted to create a space where they could breathe in some fresh air and take in the scents of the garden before going to bed. Clearly they had a well-organised programme. During the day they would exploit the working class, the evening was a time for aesthetics and haughty sensitivities. But on the other side, what did Socialism do? It got rid of exploitation and simultaneously enclosed everyone into buildings that looked like prisons. This penitentiary atmosphere did not prevail only in working-class settlements but also where they purported to promote ideas of openness, in the brutally glazed school halls. The sun that poured down on us during school breaks looked tired, almost depleted. Very quickly I came to the limits of my knowledge of architecture and said to myself that I would at the earliest opportunity find something interesting on the subject in the library.

The house had entirely enchanted me even though I was not quite sure whether I was allowed to like it. If the girls I admired imitating a punk slut look were to see me now? What would they say? And even worse, what would they think? But there was not a chance any of them would come anywhere near this place so I decided to indulge in these new impressions. First of all, the space was encouragingly different to our dark brown living room with a cheap sofa set. It became painfully obvious just how ugly the furniture that had surrounded me for as long as I can remember was. In front of me was an aristocratic antique chest of drawers from some other period, sofas, armchairs, coffee tables, pictures and a display cabinet filled with porcelain. More than obviously, this world existed long before my birth. And also went on quite regardless of me. Amassed wealth without my knowledge, developed style. And had clearly thrust me into some dark corner, watching with interest to see whether I would ever manage to get out of there.

If any of my punk girls were to see me, I would tell them that we are in a film noir, even though they would not have a clue what I was talking about (they were not exactly worldly), and this way I would maintain at least a little of their respect.

Otherwise the girls we admired were not the girls we also desired. They were, probably without their consent, divided into two groups: the cool tomboys we were afraid of for their sharp tongues and sharp minds, and the more feminine sexy ones that we were even more afraid of, though in a different way. Basically there was also

a third group, those who were in neither of the previous two, the nobodies, the bores and the average. It is these who in the end have the happiest marriages. And film noir? From the crime films I watched on our still black-and-white TV, I would say that the perfection of its surroundings almost calls for a crime. But there was something else calling me from one of the corners. Crime would have to wait that evening. Calling me from the corner was a piano.

Not an upright piano like the one I bashed away on at music school (at home we didn't even have one of those). Also not a piano that is a proper piano but is old and ramshackle-black like Dracula's casket. The piano I was looking at was brand new. The only vulgarly new thing in this room. New, and shiny white. The kind of Richard Clayderman show-off piano. The lid was open. The keys inviting. Smiling with their black and white smile. I stepped closer. There was also a piano stool, almost as if it was waiting there for me. Should I bite into this varnished white cake? I will. Even if it turns me for life into a compulsive obsessive playing sentimental tunes to old women. Let what must happen happen. In order to render the situation as silly as it could be, I chose *Ballade for Adeline*, of course, the sugary sentimental tune I hated down to its last note, but which women, young and old, always though divine. And apparently I had a particularly divine way of playing it. Just like Clayderman himself. That at least was what visitors to our home would say when mother insisted on them listening to a tape recording of me playing.

How long did I play like this? Time did not quite cease to exist but took on an entirely different tempo and I could not decide whether it was increasing or slowing down, all I did was extend the wretched Adeline in all directions. In this cocoon that seemed increasingly spider-like, it was possible to think safely about the schoolgirl whose name I didn't know and who a little earlier (or was it long, long ago in some other life) accidentally brushed against my hard-on with the back of her hand and instantly understood everything. Are girls just as afraid of us as we are of them? Is that even possible? Would it be possible to convince them to start making love with me? All at once? Only in films? Only in dreams? Or also in reality? What would I have to say, what would I have to do? And, if by some miracle they all agreed to it, could I handle all of them, down to the last girl? All fifteen or twenty, or however many there were? Is that even possible? And what would the ones waiting do in the

meantime? Would they watch me? (This thought gave me an especially inviting surge of pleasure.) Until it was usurped by the far more likely thought that they were right now giggling, telling each other about how I had a hard-on. That girls are capable of talking just as dirty as us if they are alone, I kind of knew already. Or guessed, even though Suzana and her companions always fell silent whenever I happened to be in the vicinity. Adeline or no Adeline, romanticism or no romanticism. In punishment I was going to play Adeline until it was torture, till death from vomiting. Hers or my own.

A shadow moved through the open glass doors. Out of nowhere. With a stride that indicated an obvious familiarity with the space, it crossed the room and stood next to the piano. At first I thought it was one of the girls, one who has grown taller than the others. Perhaps even the former president? But standing in front of me was none other than Tomandjerry. The local punk rock legend. The frontman of the band Apocalypse, king of the scene that wished to be seen as progressive. It was as if the Devil himself had called him. Regardless of how very much he didn't fit into the surroundings, how very much he didn't fit in with the stylish furniture around us.

'Why did you stop playing? You have it?'

It was the last thing I would expect from a punk rocker, an even greater shock than him appearing in front of me all of a sudden. But there was no trace of mockery on his face, which was an even greater mystery. So I continued from where I had stopped. Or at least approximately from there though I doubted seriously that he understood this playing as ironic in the way I was seeing it. As the climax of tonight's alienation. Yet he listened to my playing attentively. With a look that was entirely new to me. Not the gaze of the teacher at music school (she knew how to be critical with just her eyes), even less so of the proud mother who has just told her friends that her son can play Adeline and then listens to the expected and predictable comments, 'Of course he does, he even looks like Clayderman. The nose is exactly the same, the hair also.' And least of all was it the gaze of polite boredom – one I also knew well. Basically, none of this. If anything, it looked a little like the gaze of a mechanic immersed in repairing an engine, a genius so interested in how things work that mistakes interest him more than perfection. This is how I see him now, in a

slow-motion shot. Then I merely understood in a flash that the guy was not being mean, and even more, that he saw me as an equal.

'Let's see now if I can do any better,' he hummed in a jovial manner and sat down to play. Was this just for me? He played Adeline! Not even in the way Sid Vicious played My Way, as a grunting parody. No. He played seriously. Even the witches in music school would be happy with him. My mother would even be a little jealous. That this shit plays better than I do? How dare he?

'You know, I often wonder whether all women are in fact sentimental and romantic. Only that some of them don't want to admit it. I know a whole bunch of punk girls, some of them are really wild, but I sometimes have to ask myself whether all of that is not just a pose.' As he spoke he casually struck the keys, he too looking like Clayderman. It appeared he was aware of this and that this detail amused him, in general he looked like a cat that has just fed on a well-fed rat. Until Adeline, upon his casual comment, 'and so on, blah, blah, blah,' dissolved and was unexpectedly taken over by Beethoven. Moonlight Sonata. Tomandjerry playing something like that! And he is liking it!

'This you can listen to, regardless of who you are. It wouldn't even hurt the punks to do so,' he commented, no longer in the same casual manner but with the conviction of a believer. Then, still in the middle of the magical sway of the Sonata, he offered me a job for the summer. I would play with his band. What did I think of that? Would it work? The punks need a pianist? And one of the geeks from music school? Was someone making fun of me? But Tomandjerry seemed entirely serious, perhaps with only a touch of star weariness; the mix had a hypnotic power. Just like the unattainable at this moment mixing with kindness. With an entirely inexplicable affection towards me. It occurred to me that perhaps I had pleased him, truly please him, though I would not have expected anything like that from him. What I, for all its worth, did not dare ask him was what he was doing in this ghost house full of silly girls. Is this the place for a legend of his stature? He replied as if he was able to read my mind. 'I live here. What about you?'

Before I could recklessly blurt out that my sister had dragged me here on our mother's demand (of course good little boys never lie!), a stomping sound came from the garden followed by panicked laughter accompanied by a choking cough

that could only be the sound of vomiting. Tomandjerry froze briefly, then suddenly came alive. Together we rushed through the door which was more like a window. Light from the street was faintly illuminating Suzana who was bending over a beautiful flower bed. Even in the dark it was obvious that she would die if she did not throw up that moment. Not wasting any time, Tomandjerry ran towards her, grabbed her tightly from behind, and her vomit spewed all over the blooms. Once, twice, three times. Very obviously he knew what he was doing. During routinely saving the damsel in distress, he explained to me that in my playing he sensed the energy he had been in vain trying to find everywhere. Suzana, who could now stand without assistance, had clearly returned to the living, but he was only paying her half attention and continued to talk to me. 'So, that's agreed, I am very happy that you will play with us. Truly.'

I entirely forgot to tell him I would need to ask my parents first.

3

I still could not believe that all of it was not just a dream, when Tomandjerry, looking at Suzana, expertly declared that she would not be able to get home alone. He didn't have to say that I would probably not manage being her crutch all the way. Everything became even more unreal when from the darkness, out of nowhere, appeared a car, and not just any old car, a white vehicle that seemed just as unreal as the piano before, even though it did not hide a certain amount of wear and tear. It was a van, very much like the one that delivered school lunch every day, but in the night, with Tomandjerry at the wheel, it looked more like something a magician would pull out of a hat. 'Suzana can go in the back, because I don't have seats,' he suggested and I did not allow myself to be astonished that he knew my sister's name. 'It wouldn't be the first time someone vomits there. Whenever I am not transporting equipment, I transport drunks,' he said cheerily as I climbed into the seat next to him. In the back, Susanna fortunately, instead of vomiting, now had an attack of laughing. We calmly ignored her truly distasteful giggling. At the time I didn't have the slightest clue what it might mean.

Our school, which I soon noticed all illuminated, in the company of a night driver like Tomandjerry seemed something entirely different, from a banal torture house where you become bored to death, it had transformed into a slightly mysterious place, and my alter ego who attends it was a young man with the lyrical paleness of talent ringed by a halo of poetic sensitivity that turns him not into a target of ridicule but an object of admiration. Discrete admiration, but genuine. That evening I felt no guilt in that I adore everything that is beautiful, harmonious, bright, classical, high-flying, timeless and calm. And that I did not have a clue why anyone in the world would want to play punk. At that moment, as we passed the school, I was capable of telling any punk straight to their face, even those with the most chains, that all this musicality of theirs is merely a remnant reflex of banging on railings. I would dare ask anyone in the world whether what they are listening to is really their taste in music or merely a tactic they are hiding behind. So, really, once school puts you off practically everything for life, you muck around with music if you don't find it too dumb? I will never again keep my thoughts to myself, I decided for certain.

Rockers, and especially punks, of course, if at all, attend some dark school in the middle of some problematic urban neighbourhood where the sense of delinquency is tangible and the headmaster looks like an illegal stowaway. The wrong musical choice could cause a dramatic fall on the social ladder. By listening to Abba and Boney-M, you condemned yourself to expulsion. Disco was for ponces. The bravest and thus also the most respected appeared strategically ragged. Their supposedly furious appearance was in fact very much calculated and I could only wonder whether anyone else apart from me noticed. I truth, it was very clear to me that I would soon be once again in the world of my choices. Almost completely old rock, melodic and poetic music that would charm Chopin himself, that I was convinced of, acted as a solid bridge. By constantly drawing hippy signs I was fairly safe, and if I added *Make love, not war*, even more so. Then perhaps nobody will notice that I don't know how to spit cynically and with contempt onto the pavement (I have tried and realised it just made me look even more childish). Drawing a skeleton with a cigarette between its teeth went much better. I wished I could hide behind a pair of Lennon glasses but my eyesight was entirely normal. As if it was not bad enough living with his kind of peace-loving image, Mother and her friends, all

too often drunk, would praise me for the one thing I hated most. And how enthusiastic would they be if they knew what I loved more than old rock. I did not listen to Mother's records in secret because she would object me to doing so but because she would be too excited about it. A son who listens to Jacques Brel, Gilbert Bécaud and Juliette Gréco! What is nicer for an old lady! No way must anyone notice that I began enjoying playing the piano and that the classics seemed less terrifying every time. What if the punk girls I was afraid of found out? Or the kids at school whose rough image raised the most respect? How could I have known that none would fall for the programme from music school and mum's records? Or did I know they would, many a girl would? Why would someone like me even want Tomandjerry to like them? A good question, but not on that evening when I thought that I had, for the first time in my life, met someone who knew what they were doing. Who knows what they want. Who knows what they like and does not feel guilty for not explaining this to those who are not worthy of knowing. We reached home too soon. I forgot to be surprised that he didn't have to ask for the address or any directions.

Mother opened the door for us, and seeing Tomandjerry instantly forgot to ask what was up with me or even Suzana, and started ranting on about guys like him. Drugs! Troubles with the police! Abuse of girls. She seemed ready for anything this seducer might say, however non-educational that might be. I simply did not recognise her this way, and it would not have been surprising had all this come with the smell of sulphur, at least a slight trace. Our father must certainly have smelled something and he appeared, out of nowhere, so our tiny hallway was quite crowded. Unlike Mother, he did not seem at all in any way charmed, indeed, I'd say he was damn worried and for the first time in my life I noticed he had the features of a bird of prey. Surprisingly he did not say anything even though looking at Suzana it was instantly clear. 'Oh, Suzana,' gallant Tomandjerry purred hypnotically, even though he, in some invisible way, still flinched. 'Basically I have come to apologise to you because the cream in the cake was off… me and your boy, what's his name again, were not sick, but all these girls who are forever dieting have weaker stomachs…'

Father of course did not buy the story about the cream but also could not find a point to argue with it. I had also never seen him this way. The comfortably-

numbed slipper-guy showed a detective intuition and Tomandjerry picked up on this and calmly continued to bullshit, ‘My parents and aunt drove home the other girls…’ Father didn’t show in any way that what he wanted to do was punch him in the face. But Tomandjerry flinched, at least a little. Like the Devil flinches when he sees before him the spire of the village church. The foundations for a deep and genuine manly masculine mutual disapproval were set.

So these two forces were fighting over my soul. Today, when everyone listens to whatever they want to listen to and no parents want to appear old-fashioned, it would be hard to believe that I felt like a great traitor to my father. For it was completely clear to me what I would decide if it came to choosing. I consoled myself with the fact that neither of my parents knew what it was like to feel that wherever one goes not only do you sense that you don’t fit in but that everyone sees from a mile away that you don’t. So? He has no clue about the horror, I found excuses for myself, of every small gesture betraying you, nor does he have the faintest idea about the feeling of miserable non-belonging. All these years later, things are of course different. Ever since I have been able to show anyone my record collection, I know I am really old. There is nobody left who would mock sentimentality, quite the opposite, today it is called vintage and is very much fashionable. Even the singles I snitched from Mother cause excitement. Finally I am trendy, at nearly fifty!

4.

‘If you can play the Ballad for Adeline, you can also play all the other commercial shit,’ said Tomandjerry. ‘This piece is rubbish, but it’s a show of skill.’

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