

Pia Prezelj: Heavy Water

Sample translation by Jasmin B. Frelj

Ida was staring at the colours turning in the foamy water. The first batch of clothes, held in the air with clothespins, was already stretched out between the two apple trees in the garden. In the mornings the swallows liked to join them on the line, jumping and chirping and crowding into the feeder. On the hill, rising from the village like a nipple, glittered a little church, ringing with the loud chimes of bells that ate into the plain and mixed above the potatoes and rapeseed with the rattling of a tractor.

Ida was staring at the colours while misfortune roamed her garden, sticking its nose into zinnias and nibbling on the bramble. Someone was sipping coffee to her right, giving off gurgling sounds and whistling out of tune, while her fingers squashed the slippery and warm black, and she considered being lenient and graceful once again. She licked her finger and decided she would charge the man, terrible as an army in banners. After all, it has been a long time since she had some real fun.

The waiting room in the ER of the nearest hospital was a field of orange – worn down orange walls, orange joined chairs and orange linoleum. Orangey teeth of laughing nurses and the orangey hue of their skin. They sat Ida on one of the hard chairs, pushed a questionnaire into her hands and told her You will be comfortable here. She went through the purse between her legs, felt the cotton handkerchief, a handful of walnuts, an old lipstick. A squishy rotten pear got stuck to her wallet. She would have to stand up and get a pencil, explain that she cannot fill out the form without it, but she was too lazy, and her ankles hurt, her feet were swollen like a drowned man's.

Instead, she rather sucked and chewed on the pear, so juice dripped down her chin and trickled along her forearm. A girl in a stained bathrobe was coughing in the corner of the room, choking and gasping and leaning against the wall, shifting her feet in fluffy purple slippers with pom-poms. A boy with a busted upper lip sat across her, slurping juice out of a carton.

Ida permitted herself to think that the child belonged to her, that she gave birth to him, breastfed him, raised him, that she will now call him back in any moment and he will come running, of course, he will grab her arm and cling to her neck. She will caress his head, bury her nose in his hair, smelling soap, butter, the sweet joy of motherhood, sticky like a caramel. She knew that this would finally lay to rest the rumours that she once sat on the fireplace as a little girl and had such a frightful burn that nothing could be done, the poor thing could from then on only sit on the edge of her right buttock and proved to be completely without use as a wife. And on top of it all *the spot* reeked of burnt flesh.

The women at first recommended poultices, concoctions of St. John's wort and marigold oil, implored her to sit in a bucket of warm water that she boiled comfrey in, but soon realized harsher

measures were necessary, so they prayed for Ida's health, lit candles for her in wayside chapels, and after years of effort decided it was all for naught and that it was all simply God's will. After that they pitied her, tried to comfort her, and told her If you want to, I can bring some of mine over, so you won't be lonely. Ida thought this was pointless until she slipped one day and fell down the stairs, ending up in the hospital with a broken leg, where they asked her Should we call one of your children? and she gave them her own phone number.

Ma'am? said someone behind Ida. Have you filled out the questionnaire yet?

I couldn't find a pencil, she said, spreading the sticky pear juice over her chin and neck and wiping it with her sleeve. The voice sat down next to her, leaned in closer, turned softer.

Can you tell me what happened?

He just stretched out across the plot, across the parsley and carrots, and lied there all broken, Ida was supposed to say, but she only said Did you find out what's wrong with him? And when can we leave?

I am not sure, ma'am, but it will not take long, I can't tell you, I understand, I understand, yes, I think it's best you wait down the hallway, the door next to last.

Ida shifted in her seat, leaning back and forth. The girl in the purple slippers disappeared and was replaced by a young man with his hands in plaster, covered with dried blood, who was barking into his phone, Tell that bitch I'm waiting for him, tell him, yeah, tell him that.

A nurse appeared from behind the corner and motioned her to get up. The young man stopped barking at his phone for a moment, pulled a cigarette from his pocket and pushed it through his broken teeth. Ida grabbed the questionnaire, the coat and her purse and followed her over the linoleum. The squeak squeak of clogs and carts, stretchers, and nursing beds.

Did you find out what is wrong with him by now? Could you tell me?

No other reply than the swaying of the behind that lead her down the hallway, here and there, here and there, here and there, here and

Ida sunk into the stained plaid pattern and dropped her purse. She found the wet wipes in the glove compartment and wiped her forearm, chin, cheeks, eyelids, nose, cleaning off the slime mixed with the sweetness of the pear. She put the key in, turned it and whelped. The car jumped like a cat touching water, bristled to its tail and jerked forward an inch, pushing Ida against the wheel, then broke down. She stayed like that for a long time, too long – with her forehead against the wheel and her hands on the back of her head –, so that when she straightened up there was a red arch connecting her eyebrows. She tried again pushing the pedal, and turned the key with greater care.

latest information there were seven killed in the accident, with eleven severely wounded, and the train conductor contacted the supervisors multiple times before the accident, asking for technical help, as per the public statement of the representative of the Taiwanese railroad agency

The car was humming and puffing when Ida drove it relentlessly in first gear through crossroads, through all the changes of red stop yellow stop green go,

slightly overcast, more sunny weather in the west, in the morning and early noon in parts of northern and northeastern

her gums ached, fingernails hurt, eyeballs burned, she needed sleep, a dreamless night, a new morning, she wanted to forget the purple slippers with pom-poms, the carton, the linoleum,

the most common and most dangerous disease in the commercial production of apples; with the types resistant to scab disease there is no real need for regular spraying, but I would still recommend

she drove much too slow, so people honked behind her, but she could only hear the humming of the car the squeak squeak of clogs tell this bitch I'm waiting for him tell him yeah tell him

*

The blackberries glistened with rain and dew on the garden's edge, ripe and full of sweetness. The trunks of pear trees were slippery, the apples were slippery, the stalks of parsley were slippery. The towels and sheets escaped the grasp of clothespins and collapsed in soggy piles among the trees. Something like a lawnmower rattled from the neighbouring garden, turned off, started, turned off again, started.

Ida did not care about the stalks and slippery apples. She was in bed, covered over her head, trying to breathe through the tingling that crawled into her ankles and feet at night. She counted to thirty, recited the great wars, sang lullabies, and tried to name all the mountains in the Julian Alps. It did not help one bit. She thought of

Don't. Don't do this. If you think about it, it will only get worse. Get out of bed. Left leg out, then the right one. Come on, you don't have a choice.

She climbed out of bed and got to her feet. She took off the sweaty clothes from the day before, changed her underwear, put on a fresh shirt and dragged herself to the kitchen, to the pot of cold, stale coffee, a cube of sugar, a slice of bread with butter and honey and a carton of milk. Laying near the plate was BUY WD40 GREASE IT DOCTOR RAVNIKAR

Ida took out her dentures over the sink, washed her face, spat out the acidity and rinsed her mouth. She went through the cabinet, took out a blue box and swallowed a pill, then another. To seal the deal, she dissolved a lemon-and-orange flavoured painkiller in some water and drank it with another two pills from a different box. She limped to the window and let down the blinds, then

stood in the semi-dark and stared at the flickering, listened to the dewing, the babbling, the humming.

When she began to shiver, she went back to bed barefoot and pantless.

In about an hour an old man in a frock went up the hill. He sighed and sniffled, wiped his nose while walking, cursed his weak lungs. He unlatched the wooden door, raised the hem of his clothes, and went up to the top of the belltower. It echoed three times – loudly, greedily, shrilly – announcing the death of the man who spent his mornings whistling out of tune.

The slope was steep, overgrown with ferns and moss, it was moist, narrow, muddy. Wearing a yellow raincoat, Ida was making her way up with a wicker basket in her hand, though she did not know why and though her legs, she could have sworn, carried her on their own. She noticed a giant russula to her left, grabbed it by the stem, twisted and pulled it out of the ground, cleaned it a bit, shook off the earth, then turned around. There was a hirsute man standing before her.

She shifted on her feet, slipped on a damp, slick root and fell, oh my, oh boy.

Well, there is really no need to be afraid of me, he said through his beard and offered her a hand in help.

She just stared at him at first, then offered him the basket instead of her hand, as if he had come to rob her, as if saying Here you go.

I was told to make this quick, but well, when you are already offering, he smiled, reached for the russula, sniffed it, and took out a small bite.

You will yearn for your husband, he told her while looking at the mushroom and taking a step closer so she could smell his breath – the thought that she recognized this smell shot through her, the smell of ants, of anthills – so she could feel it, warm, sticky, corrosive.

Your desire will be for your husband and he will lord over you until you return to the ground just like this thing, he told her and stuffed the russula in his mouth, grimaced, chewed on it, sniffled, then chewed again for a long, long time, before he pulled out a worm from his teeth, wagged it in front of her face and told her Guess what makes me laugh.

Ida was silent, she stared at the animal and felt like throwing up.

Man feeds other creatures to feed himself with them, and feeds himself for the maggots. Is this not absolutely splendid?

The knocking woke her up. Someone was banging at the window, screaming Ida! Ida, open up! and peeking through the blinds. Ida got up and put on her socks, pants and a sweater. She rinsed

her mouth, put in her dentures and drank some water. The banging moved to the doors, screaming with Anybody home? Hello? Hello? I just came by to say hello!

Ida opened the door.

Oh my, you're home, said the woman in the plastic boots that left a trail of manure crumbs behind them. Sorry to bother you, I was ringing and ringing but you didn't hear.

Yes, I was asleep, said Ida, even though she wanted to say What do you want this time, Marta? She did not have to wait long for an answer.

I saw the ambulance and then I heard the bells ring just before. My condolences, Ida, I am so sorry, he was a fine man, not many like him. You really never know. Remember how it was when our Tone went? I was completely lost, you know, and then Lojze told me to go down to pray to Mary and light a candle each morning and say, Tone, I forgive you. So, I went there every day, you know, and it helped me quite a bit. Do you have an ache in your gums? I had it often. And the fingernails, the hair, you can't believe it. Of course, you know where that chapel is?

By Bognarček.

Yes, on the corner. Go there in the morning when it is fresh outside, to catch some air and come to your senses. I can see the way you look.

Ida turned around and shut the door in her face, forgot to say I have to go, thank you for stopping by. Marta took her time milling about and peeking through the windows, then went home through the forest where Tone was chopping wood every Sunday until a giant falling beech squashed his head and left Marta alone to take care of the chickens, the son, and the cows.

Ida stood in front of the closed door, waiting for

Absolutely nothing. What was there to wait for now? Don't tell them nonsense.

She was waiting to gather the strength to walk and move, to drag herself to the cabinet and the faucet and the sink, to the blue box with the pills. As she swallowed another two, she remembered she had to eat, that she was told Not on an empty stomach, or you will throw up. She took the butter from the fridge and sliced it like bread and took it with her to bed. She put one slice after another in her mouth and just waited for the grease to slide down her throat. She rubbed her eyes with sticky fingers, put down the plate, covered herself. A stuffed rabbit was staring at her from the nightstand. Do you remember where you got me? Do you remember how it was, then? Why the hell are you now stuffing yourself with butter?

Of course, she remembered – the first Fiat, August, mountains, the scent of the woods and sweat and cheese. It turned greasy in the heat; they diced it and ate it with bread and peppers. In Vals they spent some time in a small hotel and shared the bathroom with an older couple from Rovereto. They kept saying kebelo, kebelo at lunch, on the terrace, while on a walk, kebelo with each coffee, cigarette, game of cards. Kebelo, Ida repeated, until they taught her how to soften her tongue and

hold it until it snaps on the palate. Che bello, she laughed, still with teeth of her own. They gathered mushrooms, dried them on the balcony, stored them to take home, explored all the surrounding hills. A few days before they left a man appeared at the hotel with a backpack full of animals – shabbily stuffed mice, squirrels, rabbits, all with bulging eyes. Oh, che bello, the old lady caressed the rodents, poked their ears, snouts, then bought a rabbit and gave it to Ida, even though she resisted vigorously. They must both already be six feet under or in disgusting urns, she managed to think to herself before someone turned out the lights.

*

First, she got rid of the bread the flies were grazing on, then the milk and sugar. She threw the coffee in the pot among the asters, picked up the sheets and towels, the stained overalls, hanged them back up with the clothespins so they dangled in the warm wind. Thick tomatoes were bursting on the plot, bending the branches and dripping down each other and the soil. She was supposed to pick them, pulp them, freeze them. She was supposed to sow the radishes and the winter leek, pour wood ash over the carrots, sow lamb's lettuce, chard, Brussels sprouts. And the beets, black radishes, swedes and turnips, she was supposed to pick the ripe eggplants and peppers, support the branches of the pear and apple trees, spray the plots with chive tea and weed them, water them with nettles. She will do nothing of the above – not today, not tomorrow, not in the days to come.

You have to eat, she thought, remembering the nurse, Most stop eating, you know, most stop washing and moving and sleeping. I know it will be hard, but you mustn't forget, write it down on a piece of paper.

She dragged herself to the kitchen, grabbed three slices of bread, some minced lard and pickles, and collapsed into the folds of her sofa. There was a box on the table next to the papers that for years – decades – kept pins, needles, threads, a used tape measure, scissors, and buttons under the sign ROYAL DANSK. She was supposed to taper and hem the pants for that one and sew up the apron and the blouse for that other one who was married to Mežnar, to uphold the neighbourly relations, as she put it. Ida now cared nothing for good relations, for all the aprons and blouses and all the lives the women – these and all the rest – will lead, for all the money she used to make by sewing. Now it was her gums that stung, her fingernails that ached, her eyeballs that burned. Her feet turned purple overnight, they stung, ached, burned. She gnawed on the pickles, fishing them out of the glass with her fingers, dipped the bread in the lard and stared at the air above her, until she returned to the kitchen, to dissolve the powder and swallow the pills once again. The crumpled piece of paper was still on the kitchen table, BUY WD40 GREASE IT DOCTOR RAVNIKAR, words Ida no longer understood, their meaning was stuck in the easier days, shrunk to meaninglessness, to the shallowness of shopping, greasing, calling (calling those who can no longer help, who can only say We're sorry or You should have called us sooner). She threw it in the bin, rinsed her mouth and returned to the folds of the sofa. She tried to fall asleep, but it was too bright; sharp sunlight poured into the room, battering the cabinet, the TV, and the aspidistra with pointed beams. Ida reached for the remote.