IANA BOUKOVA

“The Stone Quarter”

(fiction)

Translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel
How can I explain that I don’t even need to dream? It’s enough just to look at the wall in my room. Or simply to look around. As a rule, when I try to retell my nightmares, I use the system for retelling nightmares. I sit on one of the guests’ laps and start crying silently. The guests are very impressed by silent crying. Far more so than by the loudest scream. “Oh,” they say, their lips rounding like zeroes. The first thing I see on their faces is annoyance. After surprise. Annoyance at their surprise.

The women most often cover my face in kisses. Their lips become damp from my tears, their cheeks also grow wet, their makeup smears and afterwards I have to wash it off my face. That bit with the kisses is convenient, because then they aren’t forced to speak. They figure that the kisses are enough. The men, however, are forced to speak. This occurs after a certain awkward silence. “As a child I had a boat,” the men say, “that was named Tobias. My father always said that boats should have female names, because that brings good luck. But I named it Tobias instead. I always wanted a dog with that name.” Here the story ends without a point, just as it began. I don’t know why men think that such a story is enough to stop my tears. No one listens to my story.

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People become revolting when they die. At least that’s what the ancients say. No one knows that I can read. I haven’t shown anyone that I can, either. The study is full of books with red and brown bindings. They are about the ancients. The others, with black bindings, are about laws. There is something hypnotizing about reading laws. Completely soporific. From them I learned that everything has its precisely defined punishment. The ancients are also in agreement about this.

The ancients depict the dead in a terrible way. They drink the blood of black animals. This blood is black. I’ve never seen black blood. Mine is red. They look like those rapacious birds with female faces that steal travelers’ food, whatever they don’t manage to devour, they trample and shit on. Sometimes I think the guests in this house are dead. Ancient dead men.

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Very often I mix people up. I even mix people up who cannot be mixed up. For example, I often make a mistake and sit in the lap of someone whose lap I’ve already sat in. This becomes apparent im-
mediately. Their leg muscles tense up. The person says in a suddenly cheerful voice: “Hello, what are you doing?” In such cases, the person immediately turns to my mother, who passes by with her perfume of a thousand stars in bloom: “Venessa,” he says, “your son with the beautiful melancholy eyes.” That is not true. My eyes are small and get red easily. They also very easily get crusty. Sometimes it happens that I’ve been with some person and afterwards, when I chance to look in the mirror, I see that the whole time I’ve had a crusty in my eye. And the person politely pretended not to notice it. Or he really didn’t notice it. Or he really didn’t notice me.

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My mother passes by with her perfume of a thousand stars in bloom. There is stardust on her eyelids. My mother is more beautiful when she doesn’t talk than when she talks. She’s the most beautiful when she doesn’t smile. When she smiles, two pairs of angular wrinkles appear on either side of her mouth. Like giant quotation marks. Otherwise her teeth are nice, white, almost translucent. My mother never has lipstick on her teeth like most women, who look like they’ve just been sucking on some dirty, half-scabbed-over wound.

I think that if my mother were a panther, she would lick my face every night before I went to sleep. With her pink tongue, through her sharp, clean teeth.

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Evening, dusk, when the light is gray between the trees and makes objects and their shadows almost equal, from my window I see the body of the messenger in the garden. Ripples of dirt—a piece of his clothing, an overturned stone—his tossed-aside shoe, his deeply rooted hand clutching at the soil. It gradually grows dark and the picture becomes clearer. In the house the first lamps are lit. The message never arrives.

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Otherwise during the day the garden looks perfectly in order. The gardener passes between the bushes. His gait is uncertain, as are most people’s. Only that the gardener is old and can’t disguise it. He prunes back branches, levels out the walkways, gathers up the dead birds. He grabs a bird by one wing, which opens up like a fan. Its body and the other wing, tucked next to it, almost drag along the ground. Hunched
over, he reaches the fence and throws it as far away as his strength allows. On the way back he brushes his hands together as if after a job well done. One of his eyes waters the whole time. Indifferently, like a natural phenomenon.

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I live in a remote place and this affects my contacts. I do everything I can to answer to my name, even when I can’t recognize it, accompanied by drawling, diminutive suffixes. It is so easy to be impolite—to not turn around immediately, to not hear, to not answer. The bad thing is that whatever I do, everyone covers up for me. The shards of a broken glass disappear within seconds, spattered clothes are wiped clean or changed without commentary, the person whom I’ve slapped across the face with a careless gesture smiles, as if this were completely natural. I know it’s not right. I’ve read the laws, too, perhaps not all of them, but I know what they’re about. Yet despite this, whatever I do sinks beneath a pile of smiles, pats on the back, changes of subject, well-meaning laughter. I lie in my room and try to guess what the point of this conspiracy is. The curtains by the window are heavy and shiny, as if it’s Christmas or something. The lampshade creates semi-darkness. The vicious rabbits from my earlier years still hang on the walls. Coupled up, they dance in meadows of trimmed grass and fake daisies. They wear short jackets with big buttons and bright colors. Have you noticed what a predatory animal the rabbit can be, what dastardliness lurks in his tiny eyes, how threatening his gesture can be, when he holds his little paws tucked beneath his belly, the half-opened mouth, his flat, sharp teeth, ready to sink into your throat? I use them in the evening to exercise my fear. So much effort. Just for one day, just in one room. Otherwise, my window is large and the view is nice.

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In the evening the city burns with its millions of embers. In the morning the smoke rises, reaching all the way to here. A sacrifice I have not wished for.

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I think I was mistaken in my first description of the guests. One mustn’t get carried away by one’s negative feelings. Perhaps we see things best when we are not present. Observing from the outside, through the
half-open door. Perhaps our absence offers the only possibility for objective observation. Things become clear, take on outlines, undistorted by the direct confrontation with our gaze. And no one else’s gaze can disturb our coldblooded appraisal. Now I see them from here, through the crack in the door: tall, untouchable, the muted conversations, the pink cocktails in their hands, the soft music. Time does not touch them, nothing touches them. Surely the ancients would have a good laugh over my attempts to make sense of this.

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The letter A resembles a gnomon. I don’t know where that thought came from. The ancients say that we never really learn anything, we merely recall that which we’ve forgotten. I remember the word “gnomon” every time I recall how the man with the deep dimple in his chin wrote the first letter on the sheet of paper. He was enormous. His palm practically filled up the page, while his torso blocked out the rest of the world. His voice was deep, hoarse, like those fake flowers in Nana’s room where you can feel the wires beneath the velvet. Most of the time I sat there frozen, my hypnotized gaze fixed on the dimple in his chin, that third eye, meaty, blind, stuffed full of flesh . . . He never got tired of repeating the same thing over and over, day after day, for months. I would open my mouth, sounding out the syllables in my mind, trying to imagine that deep, assured voice coming from my lungs. I would gasp for breath. His patience was merciless. The voice of a man fulfilling his duty. “Venessa,” he once said to my mother, with slight surprise at his own words, “we mustn’t bury our heads in the sand. He must meet others of his own kind.” A phrase that sliced through my stomach with something akin to pleasurable anxiety. My own kind?

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When someone asks my mother a question, she tilts her head to one side, such that her left shoulder is almost pressing against her cheek. The question passes by the curve of her neck, without touching her. In half-profile, her eyelids are indolent, they weigh on her gaze, but her smile takes precise aim. And everyone is happy with her answer.

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Of course, he was teaching me how to write the alphabet. His powerful hand would settle the fountain pen between his fingers with ease,
almost with tenderness. His letters were magnificent, far more beauti-
tiful than those in books. They resembled those winged women from
paintings, who had stopped for a moment, but whose flight could still
be seen in their bodies’ striving. I could cry for hours, remembering his
letters. He would wrap my hand around the pen, his hand around mine.
Whirling around the circle of a small a, through the curves of an s or g
was as full of happy dizziness as an amusement park (here I imagine an
amusement park). Left alone, my helpless hand traced out the angular
symbols, resembling printed letters, uneven, hideous. Even now, when
I write out whole pages, trying to follow the train of my thought, my
letters only resemble letters.

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In the evenings my mother shuts my eyes with a kiss. Before that
she performs a whole series of needless actions. She switches the places
of several objects on the nightstand, smooths out the wrinkles in the
curtains, tucks the covers under my body such that I look like a cocoon
and can’t move. She leaves the night light with its shade on for some un-
known reason. Then she shuts my eyes with a kiss, first the left one, then
the right. She crosses the room. Her dress rustles, her perfume leaves a
glowing trail in the darkness beneath my eyelids. She stops at the door.
I never can gather the courage to look at her, not even through veiled
eyelids, in those few minutes before she shuts the door behind her. I
never know whether my mother stands there looking at me or with her
back to me, facing outward, towards the darkness in the hallway, where
she has not yet turned on the lights, or whether she has stepped across
the threshold and has turned her head towards my bed. Perhaps it isn’t a
few minutes, perhaps it is a very short time. But in it, there is something
of the rabbits dancing with bared teeth.

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Mornings begin with Nana. She bursts into my room with noisy
gestures, turns out the lamp by my bed, pulls aside my Christmas cur-
tains. The sun is a punch in the nose and I never manage to blink in
time. She kneels down by the bed and starts getting me dressed. Her
hands are small and red, as if she is constantly dipping them in cold
water. Her fingers move lightning-fast. She puts on my white shirt, my
creased pants, first she puts on the left shoe, then the right one in her
lap and ties the laces. At times I have tried to imitate the knot Nana ties
on my shoes with only two precise movements, a perfectly symmetrical bow with ends of an even length, but I don’t get anywhere. The skills of others render me helpless.

Nana takes care of me. She digs into the plate and lifts the spoon towards my mouth. If the food is too hot, she blows on it before offering it to me. Somewhere inside me exists the memory of Nana first chewing the food before putting it in my mouth. But it is possible that this isn’t true. In our communication there is full freedom of touch and exchange of bodily fluids. She spits on her thumb and smooths down my eyebrows. She takes a kerchief out of her pocket and wipes my nose. Sometimes she follows me into the bathroom and discusses the quality of my bowel movements. “You’ve got diarrhea again,” she says, and the reproach in her voice makes me feel guilty. I don’t want to offend Nana in any way.

After breakfast, she puts my coat on me, wraps me in my scarf and we go outside. Nana’s hand holds mine firmly the whole time. My hand is encased in a fleecy glove, since it is cold outside, while her hand is bare, the skin on the back of it is cracked. She holds on to me so tightly that I can feel her bones through my glove. Sometimes we go out the front gate and walk all the way to the bend, where the road curves, heading down towards the city. We stop there and head back. Nana always walks on the outside, to protect me from cars. When a car comes—and that happens only rarely—Nana stands heroically in front of me, shielding me with her body. Her hand never lets go of me. Between her arm and her armpit I manage to glimpse part of the car that passes by almost silently, slowly due to the sharp curve, its tires scattering the fine gravel on the road.

Sometimes we don’t go outside, however, but stay in the garden. There Nana sits on a bench, while I swing on the swing made for me, but not very high, because Nana gets scared. The only time she doesn’t get scared is when my toes are braced on the ground and I push off ever so lightly with them, rocking the swing, without ever taking them off the ground even for an instant. Then she is calm and talks to the gardener about some girl named Soledad. About the night before her wedding, when her envious sister Maria put crushed glass in the sweets to kill the groom Antonio. But things got mixed up and the sweets were instead eaten by Gabriel—a distant friend and a young man with an almost unnoticeable presence, who died of internal bleeding with a single
name on his lips: Soledad. The wedding, of course, was postponed due to mourning and, the more time that passed, the more Soledad came to realize that she had actually loved Gabriel and Gabriel alone, or rather, with the passing of time, Soledad fell more and more in love with the deceased Gabriel. She took advantage of the massive earthquake, which destroyed the house and trapped Maria, who had by that time gone mad, beneath the ruins, to disappear and hide in a monastery. There Soledad washed the floors with her tears, wiped away the dust with her hair and slept on the bare ground, so as to be closer to her departed beloved. But then the civil war started and Soledad was forced to leave the monastery, without having found peace . . .

Sometimes, however, the gardener has work to do and Nana sits by herself on the bench, tears a leaf off the tree and starts picking at the soft parts between its slender veins with her little red fingers. In the end only the skeleton of the leaf is left, which strongly resembles the circulatory system in our bodies. It’s not a bad idea for a person to open an encyclopedia now and again. That’s how I learned that our bodies are covered with a network of red and blue blood vessels. And also that our faces are sinister beneath the skin—bloody, vicious, sinewy, with bared teeth. And deeper, beneath the muscular system, we have death, just as it is drawn in engravings.

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Nana clutches her lower back and complains to the gardener. It is difficult for me to get used to the idea that I am one of them. But this explains a lot of things. The guests’ condescending attitude, that constant, humiliating magnanimity. The gardener complains about the pigeons. Nasty birds, he says. Not birds, but rats, rats with wings. They eat all kinds of nastiness, reproduce, spread diseases, make a mess. And they never get tired of coming. They never learn. No matter how much I put in their food, they still keep coming back. They even peck at the corpses of their own kind (again, one’s own kind!). You get sick of tossing them out, but they never get sick of coming . . .

I watch them gesticulating. This inexhaustible passion of theirs for every little trifle. Such engagement in every minuscule detail. It’s not a question of age. There is something quivering in their movements, something that has been nipped in the bud. Even the newspaper boy or, say, the new servant girl with the cow-like eyes. As if even now they carry
the outlines of their future wrinkles, the traces of defeats yet to come. Broken. Mortal.

The gardener takes us to his tool shed to show Nana something. “You only need a few drops,” he notes proudly. There is some kind of X on the label and a squashed zero, which in all likelihood is supposed to be a skull and crossbones. The gardener definitely lacks any artistic abilities whatsoever. I expect some more striking color, but the liquid is completely clear. Nana, who is always bored by someone else’s topics of conversation, begins complaining about her back again.

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My afternoons are free. Nana takes a nap. It’s then that I go to the study. The air is stuffy and most times it is cold, because there is no reason to turn on the heat there. It turns out I am pretty hardy when it comes to cold. Someone, not very often, dusts in there and whoever it is clearly doesn’t notice that some books have been moved. Most often I sit in the big armchair under the reading lamp. There is a plaid blanket that I can wrap myself in. The smell of stubbed-out cigarettes comes from somewhere close by. I am sure that if I were to search through the cupboards, I would find an ashtray full of cigarette butts that no one has thought to empty. That way I’ll know what brand of cigarettes my father smoked. But that strikes me as completely useless information.

There are no pictures of him, not on the desk or on any of the walls. “Poor child,” Nana says sometimes, passing by the door of the study. “Poor child.” She just loves that phrase. The furniture is older than in the rest of the house. Perhaps my father adored some time different from the present.

The ancients say that at some point the world can repeat itself exactly. But this happens exceptionally rarely. And before that happens, thousands of semi-repetitions, merely hinted-at variants, vague resemblances are possible in the endless series of likely worlds. I think that sometimes it’s possible for us to try to replicate some bygone world with our own efforts. Maybe that’s what my father was getting at with his old furniture.

Sometimes I come here in the evening, too. There is very little risk of anyone coming into this room. Like once, for example, when the tall gentleman with the beard led the cow-like servant girl here and bent her over the desk. A whole bunch of creaking ensued. I think I know what that is about. The ancients speak in hints about that phenomenon, but have extremely exhaustive illustrations.

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I am trying to gradually order all the information I have in my head, but it is getting harder and harder. Harder even than falling asleep with the light on.

* * *

The gentleman with the beard and my teacher had a fight. Their voices echoed through the whole house. It was a titanic argument. From time to time someone pounded the table with his fist and you could hear all the glasses tinkling. Then something fell and shattered, there were muffled screams and the noise of furniture being overturned. Then somebody called the police and they took my teacher away. On the steps in front of the house, the gentleman with the beard gave instructions to the police, who listened to him with a striking level of respect. I had forgotten how huge my teacher was. More than a head taller than they were. He could hardly scrunch down so as to fit in the squad car. Everything ended with the gentleman with the beard giving the stair-railing one last smash with his fist.

Even though they had argued about fashion—it is indeed astonishing what differences in taste can lead to at times: brown shirts, red kerchiefs—I think that all of that was just a pretext. I think that I was the reason. Because he was teaching me. Because I am the son of a mortal father.

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I have never seen anything more hopeless than the way Nana sleeps. It happens every afternoon. Her arms are flat along her sides, her mouth is open, her cheeks sink in with every inhalation. From her mouth comes something that is both like creaking and like gurgling, as if within Nana’s innards some sort of tectonic shifts are constantly taking place. Sometimes she starts falling, letting out thin, choppy screams and searching for something to grab on to. Once I gave her my hand. I’ll never forget how Nana shrieked as she woke up. It was two weeks before she forgave me. She surely sleeps like that at night, too, but it’s different when it happens in daylight.

When she wakes up, it’s like nothing has happened. Then I have one more hour of free time. Nana listens to the story of that girl named Soledad. Sometimes I stand next to the door for a bit and hear fragments of the action. The second civil war has already started and Soledad,
disguised in men’s clothing, is selling weapons to both sides so as to feed her child. The man professing his love to her is surely lying. You can tell from his voice. But Soledad, too, who answers him, certainly understands this and is lying, too. I can’t figure out the game between them. I have the feeling that soon something bad will happen.

The ancients recognize the effect of this type of story, which leads to the “purging of the emotions of pity and fear.” I don’t know exactly how it happens, though. Nana has been crying for half a year now and still hasn’t reached any kind of purging. Perhaps the mechanism worked better in the time of the ancients.

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Someday he’ll come back with a ring on his enormous hand: a ring with a chunk of rock in it. How do I know? I just remembered this.

* * *

I think I need to limit my sources of information. To be satisfied with that which I already have. As unpleasant as it may be, a person has the right to only one explanation of things. Almost like you only have one life.

* * *

The lame gentleman has proposed to my mother. My mother told Nana that she must find a way to tell me. Nana told me. Then she told my mother, too. It’s inexplicable how, when they speak in my presence, they think that I only start hearing at the moment when they turn to me personally.

Nonetheless, things are starting to fall into place. Isn’t it striking that they are twelve in number? They don’t always come all together, but there are twelve of them in total.

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I know that the ancients are not in unanimous agreement regarding the use of this method. The majority of them, I believe, consider the empirical investigation of some problem superfluous. But I have no other way of making sure. Nor do I have the patience to observe things repeating themselves, until some unexpected event occurs that will confirm or refute my theory. Yes, I admit, albeit with certain shame—I have no patience.
It’s not only a question of their number. But also of their function, which over time I have gradually made sense of and puzzled out: the gentleman with the beard and the thunderous voice who loves to bang his fist on the table and whom no one ever contradicts. His neurotic wife, who almost never speaks. (My mother chased off the cow-like servant girl at precisely her insistence.) That erudite old maid with the sarcastic smile and owlish glasses. The brother and sister—both blond, attractive, athletic, she loves sports, he loves the arts. The rascally wine-lover with a knack for wild dances who sometimes barges into the house with a bevy of tipsy girls with no inhibitions. One far more mature lady with a matronly bust and a pleasant smile (when I cry, she kisses me the most). Two almost emblematic figures—the colonel, the lady of the house. And, of course, the lame gentleman with his factory.

Some, I must admit, were pretty hard to figure out. One other fellow with a beard, for example, whom I recognized only when I saw him asleep behind the aquarium one night. His face looked submerged in the greenish water amidst the fish and the swaying seaweed. Or take that energetic, eternally busy young man, whom I often see in the morning running past our fence, bouncing along on his winged tennis shoes. And my mother, most of all my mother, in whose slightly simpering name it is not difficult to discover the strict Latin “Venus,” my mother, who always looks like she has just swum out of the foam of events.

I think that everything said thus far exhausts the theoretical side of the question.

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I’m not sure exactly when I became convinced that no other solution exists. Time passes quickly and smoothly, without colliding with some event. And neither my days nor my books tell me anything new. I was sure that at a certain point onward, things would inevitably arrive at the bottle with the X and the O. Of course, there are numerous practical details that I must consider. It must be an evening when they have all gathered, that would make the most sense. I have to put it in something that they will all taste, perhaps the ice for the cocktails. It wouldn’t be bad to cut the phone lines. I really do have to take all possibilities into account. To not allow happenstance to interfere in any way.

I know it will be most difficult during that one hour while I am waiting for it to take effect. I truly can’t imagine what I will do during that one hour. Reading is out of the question. I will surely pace around
my room, as I have done other times. From the corner where the shiny curtain meets the wall, to the other corner formed where the opposite wall meets the wardrobe. I will traverse this diagonal again and again, sometimes face-to-face with, other times turning my back on the rabbits. A route I have never made the effort to calculate, although it is possible that in my tens of thousands of repetitions I have covered many miles. Sooner or later the time will pass and I will go downstairs.

I think the most striking thing will be the silence. Only the music will keep playing as I approach the door to the salon. Might there be some final movement, a final glass slipping from some hand and shattering on the floor? I doubt it. Only the silence and their motionless bodies.

There is also another variant, of course. I only need think of it and my heart starts beating faster. I am expecting silence, but it won’t be there. While still approaching the door to the salon, I will start hearing something, but I won’t believe it. Only when I open up the door a crack, will I be convinced, because I will see them: the soft music, their hushed conversations, the glasses in their hands, their careless gestures, as if nothing has happened. Perhaps I will shut the door immediately, perhaps I will stay to watch them for a while longer through the crack, without daring to cross the threshold—invulnerable, untouchable, immortal. Surely slightly ashamed of the fact that I had wanted proof. Yet most likely happy that I exist nevertheless, albeit outside of that room, but nevertheless close to them, in their presence.

I think that in either case, the ancients would be fascinated by the results.