"The Three Ivanas"

I am everywhere. I wake to the spinning tangerine sunrise in Donglü, once the kaleidoscopic embodiment of the Virgin Mary, then drop scoops of hot rice into my children's bowls in Hanoi. I make my morning tea with water ladled from the terraced rice field south of Luang Pragbang, the one tourists visit with their tuk tuks, then I slit the bark of the pará tree in Trang and wait for its thick milk to fill my bucket. In Magway I weave cotton into a beautiful blanket, before accepting deposits and assisting with small withdrawals at the busiest bank in Chittagong. I carry the weight of grand expeditions on my shoulders in Kathmandu, placing my feet in the grooved imprints of men, unpack in Kangchenjunga and set our tents up in Karakoram. In Helmand, I score the seed pods of the immature *papaver somniferum*, the opium poppy, teasing the hallucinogenic latex out, then let my soulful voice carry my devotions to Allah at mosque in Takestan. I fill prescriptions in Bahrain, sit in parliament in Khartoum, gather firewood in Kisangani, give my body to paying men in Yaoundé then suture patients in Oran. All this before lunch.

I fly a Boeing 787 from Warsaw to London three times a week, slurp spätzle in Sankt Goar more than that. The children in Amsterdam call me betoverend, *magical*, for my soft hands in their open, cavity-filled mouths. I hear the arguments of criminals in Turin, of taxpayers in Lyon, and of toddlers in Valencia. In Maine, I am a healer, Montreal a thief, Denver a farmer, Calgary a hockey player. I am Karen in Melbourne and Rose in Sydney. People call me Hina in Tokyo, Mia in Davos, Maria in Kiev and Ivana in all three. I am everywhere, you see.

At this moment, I am Jovana in Belgrade. Look past the bruise on my eye and the blood on my lip. I can cover it so no one will notice and there will be nothing to talk about. My role here is the unchanging one. The one that has always been and always will be. Whether I am a pilot or

teacher or surgeon, it makes no difference. Whether I am single or married, have children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, or whether I am a child myself, and sometimes I am, my role is the same.

It's early morning and the hurt is fresh. Last night Miloš returned from the kafana reeking of rakija and cigarettes. I heard him stumble into the apartment and though I pretended to sleep and the baby was cuddled beside me, he was ready, so I had to be, too.

His tongue slackened by liquor, he drooled on the back of my neck as I moved the baby over, far out of the way. She had been hurt before so I knew his reach. I let him turn me around and stumble his way in, knowing that the slow start and awkward finish, more of alcohol than age, would infuriate him. I was right.

Midmorning and I leave Miloš sleeping, take the baby to Miloš' mother's. She says nothing about my face. I say nothing about hers. The train ride is slow. Women and men, we are boxed in together. The air is sour. Another *Slava*, the celebration of a family's patron saint. Last night was the glorification of Zlata, a Christian peasant seized to be a Muslim wife within the Turkish empire, venerated not just for her refusal to conform, but for suffering months of flogging and surviving flames intended to kill her. She was eventually cut into pieces.

The October sun is unusually hot and intensifies the sweat on the men and the resignation in the women. Some get off and others take their places but the smell is the same. Women check their images on their phones, the poorer ones look in cracked mirrors fished from purses. High cheeks and puffed lips, mouths stained red, resilient eyes. Four of us leave but I am the only one to go north when the train stops, walking another twenty-five minutes to work. That I have work at all, I am lucky, and I thank God every time I enter the building.

"Dobro jutro," *good morning*, I tell my colleagues. The factory is busy with clinking machines, chattering women and serious men. Around the corner is my office, a ruddy desk among a shoddy quartet across from the toilets. I set my things on a chair then turn the kettle on for coffee. Vera takes my cup and fills it with scoops of Nescafé then she fills her own. She does something with numbers, payroll, I think. Five years before that she cleaned the floors. Her husband and the floor manager, Goran, are close.

"She's late again," Vera says, tipping her chin toward Aleksandra's desk. Aleksandra is the youngest amongst us. Twenty-three and was almost successfully married once. Now she gets drunk and dances in *splavs* instead.

"Ah, to be young again," Maša pulls her face from her own computer, fidgets with her glasses and smiles. The recollection of her own youth far off, Maša is almost sixty and a grandmother. She'll be a great-grandmother in June. My baby is still in diapers.

The kettle boils and Vera fills our cups when Aleksandra rushes in with wild hair and latex pants. I can see her breasts through her shirt and Goran can, too, because he appears almost instantly. The rest of us are married, so our expiry dates have passed and we are souring, our husbands left with rotting fruit. "Ciao Lepa!" *Hi beautiful*. Goran embraces Aleksandra and she takes him in, lets his hands and eyes consume her as though she is perishable. "I was worried about you. Car trouble?" We know that he knows Aleksandra doesn't have a car because he insists on driving her home on Fridays when his wife takes their children to her mother's in Dobrinci, a small village near Ruma not far from Belgrade.

"You know," Aleksandra says and shrugs as though it's enough of an answer. He fondles her again, kisses the air beside her cheek and tells us it's going to be a busy day so we better get working. Then he leaves, pulling a cigarette from his breast pocket and lighting it as he is

enveloped by envious men. They look back at us, at Aleksandra, with lupine eyes, slapping Goran on the back and rubbing his shoulders, having earned their recognition.

"Pigs," Vera says.

Aleksandra waves the comment away with a flick of her hand. "Ah, Vera. You say this now, but you'll be just as upset when the pigs stop grunting at you."

"They already have." She doesn't say what Maša and I already know. That their silence is even worse. It tells of louder things to come.

I wasn't always a designer. Before this I cleaned houses and baby bottoms and pet hair for several rich families and one cheap vet. Six days a week for just enough to keep me self-reliant. It was a good feeling. The work disappeared when I got married. People don't want their help to need help. It makes them feel obligated. One lady, a Canadian from Vancouver, took me to the police but they laughed at her and told her to stay out of it, that it was a family issue. Then they told me to go home and be a good wife. The Canadian cried on my shoulder and showed me some things on the computer. Eight months later she moved back to Canada but left me her laptop. It took me another five months to find a job. I wasn't pregnant yet so I had to be put to work.

My phone rings. Another number I don't recognize. "Go ahead," I say to the stranger. That's how I always answer. The caller hangs up. Maša looks at me. She knows.

For another two hours I open files, change or fix fonts, place text. It's a bit of an exaggeration to say I'm a designer when really all I do is adjust files that have already been created by someone else. Sometimes there is little work to be done but more often than not I repair their accidents or patch their missteps. I'm good at it.

I'm working on the cover for a box of bandages intended for young girls. There are pink princesses in yellow castles, wide-eyed cartoon cats, and unicorns on rainbows. Magic. Neither Goran nor his bosses seem to care much what I do. Bandages are a part of life. People don't stop buying them because the text is crooked or the colors don't match, but a pretty exterior is still necessary. Same thing with menstrual pads. Something has to stem the flow. The men in the office, the approvers, avoid looking at my designs when I have an image of a pad on screen, like it's something they're not supposed to see, some dirty impediment of womanhood they can't handle. Men at home react the same. I bring the image up often.

Even when the pad changes, when it is slimmer or wider, with wings or without, the paper liner is unchanging. This is my turn to reach out. Look close at the curvy lines and flowery shadows. Inside them, within their disguised loops and contoured feminine whorls is a message of hope. My phone number. The best kept secrets are in the crotch.

The world is full of Gorans. In Belgrade, as in New Delhi, Cairo, Jakarta or Morocco they might take any shape. They look like cousins and brothers and fathers and neighbors and bosses. In Edmonton and Paris and Orlando, they use disguises. Those Gorans have stricter rules.

My phone rings again. "Go ahead." Crying. "Hello?" The faintest whimper.

"Ladies, suppose we get some lunch?" Maša pulls off her headset, insisting Vera and Aleksandra accompany her to the pekara around the corner where the burek is fresh and the yogurt is cold. They go.

"Hello?"

Sniffling. "Ovde sam." *I'm here.*

"Are you safe?" I ask this question even though if the answer is negative I can't do anything about it. But I want to know.

"Da." *Yes.*

"Are you hurt?"

"Da."

"Do you need medical assistance? Are there children in the room? Are they safe?"

"Da." A blanket answer.

"What's your name?"

Sniffle. "Nevena." She almost chokes this out.

We engage but both of us know I'm not real, that I can do little, if anything, to help her. She tells me she is married, that she has two children, that her nose might be broken, and that she is a police officer. We both know, then, that she is not real either. Our influence goes no further than our conversation, especially in Belgrade. My gift is honesty. "It won't get better," I tell her. "You will not be heard, even when the world is quiet and your voice screams, when your blood is spilled and your children cry. A thousand nights behind closed doors, ten thousand days in the open, you will be reduced to less than nothing, but the scars those lashes bring are stronger than steel. They are molding you, the pain fortifying even the smallest cell of your being. Listen, Nevena. What they don't know is that they are making you supernatural. They are forging fire in your veins and grit in your soul. Remember it's the martyr that ascends." Silence.

"Nevena?"

"Ovde sam."

"I'm here, too."

"Are *you* a martyr?" she asks me.

"I'm a witness."

Seven more calls before the end of the day. Sometimes Maša or Vera answer for me. Aleksandra keeps Goran away. If they only knew what power we have. Thank God for periods.

Miloš is waiting at the table when I get home. The ashtray is full. He is brimming with nicotine and regret, but he'll soon piss this out with the rakjia. He touches me with tender hands. "I've been thinking." A dangerous thing.

"About?"

"You. Me. Us. This place." I let the silence build between us. "What if we get out of here, get out of the city for a while, maybe settle somewhere quiet."

The dishes need washing. I feed the baby and change her diaper. She is calm today, a giggling, inquisitive bundle of skin. Miloš bounces her on his knee while I prepare potatoes and ćevapi, both spicy the way Miloš likes it, neither of which agree with my stomach. The baby stops bouncing and starts fussing but Miloš holds her tightly, urging her to behave. His fingers settle deep in her skin and she reaches for me but Miloš spins her around and puts his face just inches from hers. "Ne!" he bellows. *No*. Ask anyone and they will tell you how much Serbians love children. But ours was born without its most important part. Me too, for that matter. I scoop up my unequal child. "Why move?" I ask. "Why now?"

"Because," he says and, like Aleksandra, it is enough of an answer because it is all I will ever get. I can expect no more, can dream of even less. That important part of Miloš, the one that entitles him, is also his greatest weakness. It fills him with undeserved pride. I don't press him for more. I know he has lost his job again so he wants to retreat to his grandfather's village, a settlement for the vanquished.

"What about my work?" I say it innocently but he reacts as if I've pounced on him like a tiger. He swings back.

"Quit."

I wonder who will take over for me, if someone will change the number on the pad. Maybe Vera or Maša. I wonder if anyone will still call the number I've left, if anyone will reach out to me, if there will be another witness out there for people like me. I wonder who will answer my call. Maybe my daughter. Maybe her daughter. I wonder who will answer their calls.

I am Ailith in Edinburgh and Olga in Moscow. Now I am Sister Dalisay in Manila.

