

Linda Stift

The World of Beautiful Things

A small block of banknotes changed hands at twilight, and we were allowed to climb up onto a truck, whose loading ramp was banged shut behind us and bolted. We had been instructed beforehand, in a few words of English, that we had to switch off our mobile phones now and told how we had to behave if one thing or another happened, then the man wished us lots of luck in our own language. He said it so quietly, that we hardly understood him. It almost sounded as if he were talking to himself. He seemed to have noticed, because then he added a “Good luck”, loud and clear this time.

We sat on wooden benches which had been fixed to the sides. There was a smell of uncleaned toilet. We pulled our knees up to our chests and waited. Men, women. How many? We didn't count off. There had been no roll call. So our number remained uncertain. No ray of light reached us. A rummaging and rustling began. One after the other we took our pocket lamps out of our rucksacks, the new ones, made of coloured synthetic materials, which we had acquired especially for this journey. For days we had searched for just this item, with which we would enter the new country. We didn't want to give the wrong impression, the bag had to be useful and look good, be the right size, we didn't want anything that looked as if our grandfathers had already used it.

We kept the torches pointed at the floor, waited. No one spoke. An occasional sniffle could be heard or the clearing of a throat. Someone

sighed and someone else grunted, which was followed by embarrassed silence because everyone was doing their best to suppress the sounds of their body. A door was banged shut. The truck drove off. Now we began to move around. Although we could have stood upright without any bother we remained stooped, in order to balance the lurching and rocking of the vehicle, and talked all at the same time. We shone our lamps into the corners, empty sacks and tins were lying around, crushed paper and mouldy bits of food. A set of tyres was fixed to the driver's side, we also found two metal latrines which partly had a brown encrustation inside and were rusty. We cleared the rubbish and the buckets under the benches. We turned the buckets the other way around, hoped that the stink would disperse. We made ourselves comfortable as best we could. We unpacked our food and laid it on newspapers on our knees, newspapers which we had hastily bought but had never read. At most glanced at the horoscope and immediately forgotten it again. We had similar packets of provisions with us, yet nevertheless exchanged salami for smoked ham and goat's cheese for sheep's cheese, a cautious, subdued picnic mood took hold. To drink there was water and liquor, no beer, it made one to urinate too often. We wanted to delay the unavoidable use of the latrines for as long as possible. It was hot and stuffy. Later it was more lively, the liquor eased the anxiety, but it was not at all like being in an inn. We didn't smoke. We didn't talk about the past, only about the future we would find, how much money we could earn, in what huge apartments we would soon be living, or in what small but neat rooms, if we wanted to save every cent. Which training courses and which professions we could take up. And why not study? Medicine. One can be a doctor everywhere. Just learn the language quickly. Whoever speaks the language of the country has already won. The beautiful dreams floated like soap bubbles from our mouths. Then, when

we had saved enough, we would come back, with our own car, open a practice, or build a house, on the coast perhaps, and why not even build a hotel? The new country's hunger for the sun was great, because they had no sea of their own, only mountains. And they absolutely wanted to be by the sea. Even in winter they undertook trips to faraway ocean shores, to lie on the hot sand or on the round pebbles. They let themselves be cooked by the hot sun, as if there was no tomorrow. Even after lunch they didn't permit themselves a break, were again lying on the striped deck chairs with bloated stomachs and marinated like grilled fish and every half hour shifted their sun bed according to the position of the sun. A little boarding house, it could be enlarged later. One doesn't need much to begin with. White towels and a sack full of little bottles of shower gel. Strong coffee and sweet pastries. It was all so easy if one just had a little money on the side. Start-up capital, those were the magic words, and quick credit. Our banks, which they had already bought up anyway, would invest in us with enthusiasm. We juggled these and similar words and we already saw ourselves as hoteliers in fine suits or costumes, shovelling gold into the safe in the evening. Not for a second did we think about the economic crisis. That perhaps there might be no use for us at all. For us there's always work. We don't think ourselves too good for anything, we're well trained, we'll sell our labour cheap and so be preferred to the locals.

Gradually one or other of us fell silent. The latrines were brought out, we had tears in our eyes from shame. We hated the loud patterning of our stream of urine, it's only men who don't mind something like that. We could strain as much as we wanted and clench our teeth, so as not to produce any patterning sound, it was hopeless. Especially as at the same time we had to compensate for the rocking movements of the truck with

our feet and thighs, so that nothing went on the floor. And quite apart from the embarrassing body position, which we had to adopt, before the gaze of men we didn't know.

We on the other hand are used to urinating half-publicly and with our own kind. We think nothing of it. On the contrary. We make a joke of it, organise little competitions. We take the bull by the horns, in order to save face. We told the women they shouldn't turn grey over it. Nature demands its due, and we certainly wouldn't use it against them. Anyway we wouldn't even look. If it reassured them we would even put our hands in front of our eyes. We did it, too, although one or two squinted between their fingers. The pattering sound we continued to hear unfiltered, we couldn't cover our ears.

We agreed to sleep in shifts. Because we couldn't all lie down at the same time, there was not enough room for that. We spread rubber mats and sleeping bags out on the floor, two or three lay down squashed together on the benches, the rest of us simply remained sitting, we slumped down or we sat upright against the side of the truck, stretching out our body as if in a big bed. As if we were hanging from a hook. Then the pocket lamps were extinguished, only whispering and mumbling now, hasty swallowing, finally loud breathing, snoring and groaning. We slept uneasily, threw ourselves from side to side or were thrown from side to side by the driver braking or accelerating, knocked into other bodies, which lay just as restlessly beside us. We carefully reached out a hand to touch a face, to touch straight, curly, thick or fine hair. We leant our head against a shoulder. Someone pressed his body against our back, wrapped both arms around us and put a leg across our hips. We lay there quietly. We accommodated to the embrace. We turned round. We slumped to the

side. We slid away, pushed arms and legs back, didn't want to feel anyone. We were as if nailed to the sleeping bags, our arms pressed to our sides, so as not to bump against anyone. Our sleepless eyes fixed on the darkness, we held our breath and made ourselves as thin as possible.

The liquor had parched our throats. As if blotting paper were sticking to our gums, mouths half open we sat and lay there, the mucous membranes of our noses swollen, and thought of those we had left behind, how they would welcome us on our return, our pockets full of money and useful knowledge. How they would glance admiringly at us and shyly ask for our opinion. How they would all at once respect us. How the family arguments would make no impression on us, because now we had something to say. Sometimes, however, the returnees were badly received, fathers banned daughters from their house, because they were strongly suspected of having prostituted themselves in the foreign land. Because the fathers couldn't imagine anything else. The mothers boxed their sons' ears right and left, because they had caused them sorrow, because the sons had almost sent the mothers to an early grave. But better a box on the ears than being cast out. That would not happen to us, our families were open-minded. Why did we leave them? Because we were persecuted, mutilated and killed, because of money and power, because of our religion, because we were sacrificed for a higher ideal or for tradition. Because so many and so many had already gone before. Because we would not be the last. Because we wanted a better life. Perhaps simply because we wanted a different life. A life with possibilities. We had been accosted by people who told us a paradise was waiting for us and we would be crazy not to enter it. They promised us the moon and who would not want the moon, we had enough of what we had here. They offered us a full package with a hundred per cent

guarantee of success, we didn't need to worry about anything, pay so much and so much and they would get us into the desired land. As simple as that. Like in a travel agency. Or we had ourselves made contact with these middlemen, we knew of course, that elsewhere the moon is not always within reach. That one had to see to one's own paradise.

Perhaps we would bring someone home, to marry them. But one could also marry in the new country, there were supposedly people who made themselves available, for money naturally, then one was immediately officially recognised and got the necessary papers, so as to be allowed to stay. But we didn't want that. We wanted to marry for love. We wanted to marry someone, whom we ourselves had chosen. Not our parents or some shark of a matchmaker. We dreamt of weddings which lasted weeks, months, years, where we were showered with rice and rose petals, where the guests were sleeping under the table and we as bride and bridegroom were long ago over the hills and far away. Where roast pigs were brought in and baked fish and stuffed fowl and sausages and traditional deep-fried pastries, sweet and salty, and cakes and gateaux and confectionery, until everyone felt sick and pitch black coffee had to be handed round. Where the wedding cake had tiers and the icing crunched between one's teeth. Where the mothers tore their hair and the fathers sang sad songs. Where the young danced and the old giggled. And one smart-alec rode on a pig. Although we were just leaving the country behind us, in which there may once perhaps have been such weddings – not one of us had ever been to such a festivity – as future homecomers we longed for nothing else.

When we woke up, we quickly switched on our pocket lamps, looked at our watches with swollen eyes. It was early morning, time to get up. And

time to lie down. We didn't want to stand up immediately, just another minute, we stretched and rolled over again, while feet were already scraping impatiently. Kicks were administered, playfully or less playfully, finally we clambered onto the benches and pressed our fists into our eyes. We stretched out on the sweaty sleeping bags. But we didn't sleep, instead groaned out loud and theatrically rubbed our numb limbs. Thermos flasks with coffee and tea were taken out of the rucksacks. The buckets were brought out again. Still embarrassed, but without tears at least, we let it patter down. The other thing we held back. Unthinkable. Rather put up with constipation.

Shitting caused us more bother than pissing. Those who could held it back, but not everyone managed to. Furthermore we first of all had to empty the contents of one bucket into the other, no one had thought of that the previous evening, of reserving one bucket for pee, the other for shit. The urine bucket was already pretty full and slopped over every time the lorry braked. We wrapped an old rag we had found around it like a scarf. We spread out the sacks. But it wouldn't do for long. The latrines would have to be emptied soon. We banged with our fists on the side behind the driver, although we had been told we mustn't bang, never, under any circumstances. The driver couldn't be unaware of the problem. We banged for several minutes, then the driver banged back. The buckets, the buckets, we shouted and went on banging. The driver replied, but we couldn't understand him. He didn't stop the truck either. Resigned we returned to our places. At some point he had to stop, he certainly didn't have a piss bucket on the passenger seat.

We had relatives in the new country. We pinned our hopes on them. What letters they had written, the relatives. Day after day we had waited for the

postman, in order to take delivery of these letters in their rustling envelopes. With brightly coloured postage stamps and air mail stickers, postmarked weeks before. They had started up restaurants, food shops, computer companies and bespoke tailors, the relatives, they worked day and night, the house with garden and swimming pool, in which they lived, was so big, that one could get around it on roller skates. They had employed servants from distant island states. We were welcome at any time, their house was of course always open to us. Hospitality was the most important thing, blood was thicker than water. That and much more was written in the letters, and we took it at face value. It sounded like America, like the United States and not like Europe at all, but we wanted to deal in this currency, too, if it was to be had in Europe.

Later, when we had built something up and perhaps didn't want to go back, because we had got used to the new country, because our traditions had become dubious and the old language brittle, and parents and grandparents only haunted our heads, with their new hairstyles, like ageless spectres, we would write them letters, and our younger sisters and brothers would wait for our news. But we wouldn't write letters at all, but e-mails. Then they wouldn't need to wait for the postman, who had perhaps anyway been an informer. Did we even know whether all the letters had arrived back then? Had he read them from beginning to end with trembling fingers or, on the contrary, unmoved and indifferent before he brought them to us? Had he copied and filed the letters? Or learnt them off by heart and later spoken them on tape at home? Now we would never find out. We would not look back, but look forward. There was no going back any more. We would write to our younger sisters and brothers, that they should follow us, here there was enough for everyone, they could stay with us. Until then we would send them chocolate with

nuts, magazines, books, DVD's, cool clothes. We would send money. But not by post, we would trick the postman, who had perhaps been completely innocent.

At some point the truck came to a stop, with a jolt that made our teeth knock together and tore us away from our beautiful pictures, we became aware of a dull roar, we were probably beside a motorway or expressway. A door banged, the driver had got out, our ramp wasn't opened. We jumped up and began to knock. A voice out of the darkness said that it was now 4 a.m., we had no idea when we were supposed to arrive, no one had said. It's impossible to say exactly we had been told. We stopped knocking, it was pointless. The driver must already be far away from the truck. To save the batteries we didn't switch on our pocket lamps. We waited with tensed muscles and pricked ears. No one made use of the interruption to go to one of the latrines, although it would have been easier to use them than on the road. The door could be opened at any moment, we hoped. And we certainly didn't want to be caught with our trousers down. Without the driver we felt wretched, what if he didn't come back? How often had we heard of trucks standing around for days and in which the rotting corpses piled up? Suffocated or dead from heat stroke. Old, young, mothers with babies at their breast. Dead from hunger or thirst, with haematomas on arms and legs. Well, we would be able to free ourselves wouldn't we? It couldn't be so difficult to break open the door from the inside. We were young and strong. And hadn't we seen a crowbar between the set of tyres? We groped for our pocket knives and hairpins.

He came back. After an agonisingly long half hour, during which in our thoughts we had organised our funeral in our homeland, he banged the door and drove on. Although he hadn't let us get out, we breathed a sigh of relief, were as happy as little children, whose mother had disappeared from view and unexpectedly turned up in another place. We forgot the funeral speeches, the cramped limbs, the by now bestial stench and let the movement of the lorry rock us back into the world of beautiful things.

When the tailgate was opened a mass of fresh air rolled in, which was greedily sucked in by our lungs and made us dizzy. A man waved his hand, out, out. We bundled everything together, the new rucksacks were already marked by black streaks, and dazedly crawled out of the truck. We could hardly stand upright. A narrow new moon was carved into the darkness. The driver stood by his door, smoked a cigarette and nodded in acknowledgment. The nodding was not meant for us, but for himself. His job was finished, he had delivered us to the desired place without incident, he was satisfied with himself. He was satisfied with the payment. He took one more draw on the cigarette, it burned down to the filter. The driver flicked the filter through the air, waved and got into the truck. He started the engine and drove off. We followed him with our eyes, with tired looks. We had not exchanged a word with him, he had taken a lot of money from us, he had let us stew like cattle, yet we didn't bear him any ill will. Quite the opposite, we were grateful to him.

Now we stood alone with the man, who likewise had not said a word to us, at the edge of a wood. He handed out copied notes on which the route was marked which we had to cover on foot. At the point where we were

standing there was a bold cross, at the point we had to reach there was a circle, the distance between the two was marked with a series of arrows. We were to set off quickly in groups of two and three, at ten-minute intervals, at the other side, at the spot with the circle, a fellow-countryman of ours was waiting, we were told. It would – he shook his wrist, the sleeve of his leather jacket slid up and a Rolex with shiny gold metal links appeared – take us about an hour, we should not switch on torches, the path was simple, always straight ahead, we shouldn't talk too loud, preferably not at all. He stretched out the arm with the Rolex like a signpost. Then he lowered it, the watch disappeared under the sleeve with a quiet rippling sound, he wished us “Good luck” and walked off in the opposite direction.

We watched him go, until he was swallowed up by the darkness of the wood, then we looked at the pieces of paper, then in the direction we were supposed to go. Helplessly we shifted from one foot to the other. Fifteen minutes before we had still been sitting in the truck, wrapped in our sleeping bags, had been drinking liquor and leaning against each other, now we were standing in some piece of woodland. We could still turn back. We could come again another time, when we had more money, more muscles, more freckles. Why had we left? We could hardly remember the reasons any more.

We could not agree which of us should set off first. No-one wanted to make a start. Only two groups formed, identical with those who at the beginning had slept on the floor and those who had sat on the benches. A long discussion began, we talked ever more loudly, until our ears were ringing and we fell silent with exhaustion. Someone looked at his watch. We finally had to get moving. With an effort the first four of the wooden

bench group detached themselves and walked in the direction the man had shown. We turned round several times, made the victory sign, although our knees were shaking. Then the second, third group, all at shorter intervals than ten minutes. That seemed too long to us, we didn't want to be so far away from one another. There was snapping and rustling under our feet, thin branches struck our faces, invisible animals uttered strange noises. And always the fear that we were already being observed and soon the trap would snap shut. Step by step we advanced into the darkness, fought our way through this nature, which separates us from you. We were intruders, and nature was showing us that. It was bristling and kicking out. If at first we had still hesitated, taken careful steps, now we stamped inconsiderately into the thicket in our clumsy trainers, as punishment we stumbled over roots and tree trunks. We hobbled on with sprained ankles. If we encountered others in front of us, we overtook them, or we fell back a little, before going on, didn't even wait five minutes. We were now just one long strung out line. An undisciplined queue of people, gaps between them, as at the check-out of a supermarket.

More than an hour had already passed, we kept on plodding around in the wood, didn't know if we were going in the right direction at all any more. We were advancing more slowly than at the beginning. Keep going, keep going, we hissed at each other, if we seemed about to stop. No trace of a fellow countryman waiting for us.

In the distance the barking of dogs. Very faint still, but it was coming closer. We walked more quickly again, the damp, night-time cold penetrated our clothes. Our legs got caught between plants and bushes. We fell flat on our faces and lost sight of those who had been walking in

front of us. The dogs were quite close now, one could hear them panting, one could hear the snap links of their leads clicking against the rings of their collars. The dogs must already have scented us. We could hear the footsteps of the dog-handlers, there was a hubbub of snapping wood and dragging branches. Now we could hear voices as well. Voices calling out commands in a foreign language. Voices shouting, tearful voices, self-controlled voices. Barking dogs. I simply remained lying on the musty woodland floor, laid my head on my crossed arms and closed my eyes. Something long with cilia crawled over my hand. I expected at any moment to feel the wet muzzle of a dog or a cold rifle barrel at my neck.

When I opened my eyes, I was just able to catch someone saying “Good luck”, then a loading ramp was banged shut. Soon the truck was lurching and rocking. I was sitting next to other people on a wooden bench. No ray of light reached us. There was a smell of uncleaned toilet. Torches lit up, food was unpacked and placed on newspapers on our knees, which had been hastily bought but never read. Someone showed me my horoscope, but I immediately forgot it again.

(Translated by Martin Chalmers)