

Guti's Stories

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It eluded me, but I didn't know when. Maybe it happened at the marketplace. You just glance around and all of a sudden you lose something. It was just the way you're taught in school: with an introduction, a body paragraph, and a conclusion. And suddenly it was gone.

I came to you because I couldn't find a job there. At the unemployment agency, they told me that there are a lot of people who have degrees in Slovenian and that there are too many of us and that they could use us to feed swans. That hurt, of course. But women are generally more sensitive than men. We are weaker than they are. We have a female bias. A whole swarm of biases. And we even have to make ourselves look pretty, whereas men can just look like monkeys. When they are better looking than monkeys, they think they are elegant. Now I lost the thread of the story. If I were a man, I could turn to seminar papers. Men write such nice seminar papers. All I have left are emancipation stories, just like the ones that my friend Franca writes. Then she participates in some kind of emancipation interview and looks downright sexy. And it's on purpose, so that men get upset and say: "God, what an amazing woman. It's just a shame that..." I always wished I could be similar to her. And that I could write that kind of literature. That my stories would have a clear, leading message. From such an idea, you could derive quite a lot. That women tend to cry more than men. That they have smaller feet than men. That they take men to bed with a basket full of emotions, with large posies. And men don't need any posies and baskets, and why should they? That these peddlars and lowbrow women keep prattling on about love. That a woman fills all her worlds with a bed. And that a man only uses a bed to frame his worlds, to underline and outline them, polish and illuminate and enliven them in some other way. — Hey, these could be the messages or ideas. But I'm not just stealing again. I'll probably never be able to write anything of my own. Let alone the kind of literature Franca writes.

I left because my stomach glued itself shut, you see, and my tongue glued itself to my teeth and my teeth to my tongue. I decided to leave out of curiosity as well, you see, what did I know about this policy of yours? —Nothing, just like you. I couldn't just tell the first person who walked by that I was leaving. Who would seem trustworthy and capable of comforting someone. I couldn't tell anyone that my stomach was glued shut. I didn't even think that you would understand. To you it seems that a person can only glue something else, like an envelope. And so I went. I had

the bus ticket in my pocket, no, maybe in my wallet, or somewhere in my bag, as well as the confirmation of my confirmation and the permit and all the other paperwork, too. Everything had to be announced, published, labeled, explained posted, confirmed—and in a friendly manner. And when it comes to uniforms, I always mix everything up. I never could tell the difference between an officer and a security guard or a customs officer and a conductor. I also have trouble with mail carriers. I always think that they are police officers. I'm a little better with firefighters. Firefighters are not like that. They just don't have time. Oh, customs officers do have time, while they wait for their pensions, officers do have time when they think of war, only the mail carriers never have time. Unfortunately, that's not enough for someone to tell them apart from the others. But the firefighters are really cute. They have a big red truck and a siren. In the summer, they organize cook-outs. I like going to them. I always buy myself a sausage and a beer.

The trip was not simple. Especially not like this, with no story whatsoever. There's always someone who asks you questions, and if you tell them that you're going somewhere, they ask you: why there? Well, of course so I could go to Mount Triglav instead of here. And I would sleep with friends beneath larch trees. And probably even then you could find someone who would say: If I were in your shoes... Even though he had no idea what it's like to be in my shoes. Near my shoes. Hovering over my shoes. On top of my shoes. Under my shoes.

I am cold. Can I light a cigarette?

I also had to leave because of him. I had to leave him. Otherwise, I would have tired him out, worn him down, exhausted him, destroyed him. I don't know how to love according to a schedule. I gave him my tomorrow, but he couldn't take it that way, young and fresh as the blood of an innocent bride. That's why I started to devour him. Because he was one of the beautiful, of the honest and the good, of the restrained and the civilized, the sated and the imaginative, of the smart others. With him, I played that game "last hour breaks, not in hell yet, last hour breaks, and hell..." I wrote him pompous poems with end rhymes, interior rhymes, and alternating rhymes, and whole hordes of raging hendecasyllables with or without an acrostic. To convince him. But nothing can help him. He accused me of luring my poetry out of him. No whore of yours will ever stay with you because of poetry, I told him. But something has scratched into me, into the place where, according to medicine, there is nothing. The unnamed about the unnamed.

On this reservation of yours, the needs of people are divided into needs of the first order and of the second order. You need to state your opinion. To decide. To divide yourself. To get in line. Because there has to be order.

I took a taxi from the station to the house on Mikolaj Street. Where you are all the people take cabs, can you tell me why? Sometimes they don't have money to buy bread, but they still take cabs. In Austria, for example... what's wrong with Austria? People rarely take taxis there because they save their money. But then again almost no one reads. Books are expensive. That's why they read advertisements. Different advertisements. For cheaper soap, shampoo, liquors, bananas, underwear, shoes, toilet paper, hand cream, creams for under your eyes and on top of your eyes, for traveling... Austria is a land of foreign workers and of course they don't read either. No one socializes with them. People maybe ask them how-are-you or have-you-gotten-used-to-our-country or do-you-miss-your-homeland, sometimes perhaps in a friendly tone, and sometimes in a sadder or emotionless tone, depending on the seriousness or solemnity of the moment. It makes one feel as if he were born anew for weeks. As if some mysterious calling fulfilled him. But usually people don't talk to foreign workers. And they usually don't invite them to their homes. Maybe they only say my-wife-says-hello.

You can call this an apartment. You rent it out to strangers. For that alone these rooms can't become a home. And I came here on the very evening when the penguin suit told us that the next day's butter is again available only by voucher. The cows are on strike, people said, they don't let people milk them anymore, Amen. I heard someone throw a stone in the window, cling clang, it broke. The sophisticated lady who was waiting for me said something about the people being uncultured and added that not all of them were like that. She was a very sophisticated lady.

Don't be afraid, she told me, they're just running drills. They say that there were military planes. Yes, they were, even then. But then again, I've never been afraid of military planes in my life. They were always just running drills.

Ma'am, I said, as the taxi drove off, are you sure you're not mistaken, they told me I would be living in a student apartment building, but this house is falling apart.

There's no mistake, she shook her head.

Then she looked at me. Only women can look at another woman that way. If she could, yes, if only she could, if her status would allow it—things like that are very important to you—she would have asked me at once: where did you get your shoes, where did you get your scarf, you look very good in pink, I think I'd look very good in red. Women will be women, you know, they always have and they always will discuss clothes. And only horrible losers think that beautiful, light, soft, fitted dress and flirty dress can be substituted with an, hm, idea. Ask Vitomil Zupan. He

knows a lot about these things. This is the type of person who should be leading a country.

And she thought I was spoiled. That is why I didn't want to tell her again that the big, grey house was falling apart. The plaster was almost completely falling off, straw was sticking out from under some sort of cement patches, or something that looked like straw. Let's go, she said. My shoes dug into the mud, and I tripped. It was dark, but I know she smiled at me.

We had the anniversary three days ago, I said slowly and carefully, but she knew what I was going to ask her. All the newcomers must ask the same questions.

They said on the radio that it was clam, she answered.

Why are we going through the cellar and not through one of those entrances facing the road, I asked.

Because, she answered nervously, well, but maybe she wasn't nervous, maybe she was just angry because she thought I was spoiled, because she said the house was planned as an apartment building with more than one entrance. And now this is home, and a home needs a doorman, only one of course, and only one entrance. So that we can know who comes and who goes. So that it is safe. This is why they closed the upper entrances and they found a place for the doorman on the other side of this house. You can only get there by going through the cellar. Do you understand now, she said, do you understand?

I didn't answer her. The idea seemed ludicrous.

Do all the tenants go through this cellar? I asked. All of them, she said. And she took the stairs as she left.

This is very narrow, I muttered. I kept hitting the walls my carry-on.

Narrow, my lady said curtly.

Where do all these doors lead to? I asked.

The administration of the building has its offices here, she said abruptly, I'm going to check you in now, and then you'll get your key.

And so I ended up in this apartment. You are in the world now, I said to myself. You only need to wait for your story. I closed the big wooden door behind me, they looked metal, but I felt them—they were wooden. I just stood there and stood there.

I addressed someone who wasn't there in an honest and imploring and nest-like kind of way. What was left was the hallway, nothing special,

just three doors and a bed, covered with newspapers and full of dirt and a big, white refrigerator humming like a bulldozer, and rusty water running from a faucet in a tin sink.

I don't know what your habits are like. But I was getting used to talking to someone here and there, or on very rare occasions. But not to a doorman. And definitely not with a machine which picks up the phone instead of people from day one. And also not with that sophisticated lady who kept coming over until my coffee started to run out. Of course, she did tell me things every time she came by.

But why, for goodness sake, why did she never ask me about that red scarf?

I'm happy with the job I have at your university. The first couple of days the students looked at me funny. They found it strange that I was so young. That where I came from it's common for people to come out into the world so young. You say that this is not right, that people should be experienced.

Ever since the streetcars stopped running, I've walked a lot. The path to the city is slow-going and actually hard work. You have to look around and see everything up close, everything that would otherwise pass you by. And you have to think about things you wouldn't think about otherwise. How the people are given timelessness. This is what you will say in your story, I told myself, in your agile story. Which will, by all means, be about dresses and red scarves as well.

Day after day, empty displays stared at the street and at me. People were looking at the floor. They didn't want to know who I was. But then again, neither did my neighbors. As if they were afraid. We couldn't take the train. You can't leave the city, either. But why would we even leave the city anyway? This city is a wonderful cultural and historical monument. And it has a cathedral. With a golden dome on top. Cathedrals with golden domes on top are very rare. With their own domes. Our city is full of landmarks. On the right riverbank there is a well-preserved Jewish ghetto as a reminder for today's young people. So that they see how horrible it was in the past. To remember. To learn from it. To draw a conclusion from it. Conclusions must always be dragged to the light of day by their tails because they never come out by themselves, those bitches.

Kings were crowned in your city. Of course, they also crowned queens. What would kings do without queens? Have you ever seen a king who would voluntarily be without a queen? I've heard of kings without kingdoms, but not of kings without queens. Kings have to have queens. And queens are women, ha! They have to have beautiful gowns. Have you ever seen a queen in rags? Only in fairytales, and even in those, only metaphorically speaking. Where you live, you offer them overalls instead of

Tyrian purple cloth. This is probably why they got angry and left the fairytale.

I almost decided to leave your city. It had been a whole year since I'd come here, and I hadn't written a single story. It was becoming clear that I would never write a story. Next week I will quit my job, I decided. And I'll take my suitcases and get out of here. That was my decision. I don't know the reason I couldn't write. I had a great number of papers, but they were all just scribbles, nothing tangible, nothing whole. There was no story. Just shit. There is something wrong with your ability to immerse yourself in the story, girl, I said to myself. Just look at the gypsies in the park. They're perfect for your story, for a story that would purify the masses with a touch of romantic sorrow. You can make up a lot about gypsies... I decided to try again. One last time.

In a torn, dark-colored dress, for days I followed gypsy camps in city parks. I hid in the bushes and sneaked inconspicuously near their camp fires. I gawked at them for hours upon end. I stared at the babies, who hanged from the uncovered breasts of their mothers. I muttered their songs. The first week, I'd already tried to steal a can of food in the nearest store, the only one that was still left on the shelf. The cashier howled so much that I still to this day don't know when and how I ended up in a completely different part of town.

Then I tried begging in the streets. I sat at the corner of a big house, into which, day after day, many tourists came. But they just walked by, sometimes one of them would kick me or trip over me, and dogs were lifting their legs in my direction and after seeing me they stood there, surprised, on three legs instead of all fours. No one gave me a dime. Lucky for me, I still got my regular pay at the university every month, otherwise I couldn't have even survived. But then one day I was discovered in one of the nearby bushes by one of those wide-shouldered gypsies whom I especially liked and from whom I expected the most—I must have stepped on a twig or something. He started hitting me with a stick. I screamed so loud that the police came. Obviously there haven't been any gypsies near me since then. They have probably found some other park. And I wouldn't even think of trying to find them again.

I opened the door of my apartment on Mikolai Street in desperation without any willpower, completely despondent, forlorn, and exhausted. I heard the radio in the apartment. I became nervous because I thought I hadn't left it on. And then I saw him. He sat behind my typewriter. In his left hand, he was holding a glass of lemonade substitute. In his right hand, a lit cigarette. His big red ass was the first thing to catch my attention. For a moment, it made me think that the whole apartment was red, that the lemonade was red, too, and that I was red as well. Which was

impossible, of course. But the ass was very real indeed. Its owner was a large orangutan.

I didn't know what to do. I stood still. We were staring into each other's eyes. Now I know: there had been no lies between us from the very beginning. After a while, I gathered the courage to stop into the room. The apartment was mine, after all. I pretended that the orangutan wasn't bothering me. I took off my shoes and turned off the radio because something had to be done. The visitor pushed back the typewriter, put his feet on the table, and lit a new cigarette. He sipped his lemonade calmly. Damn dog, I thought to myself. But I didn't dare to say anything. The orangutan got up, and then I heard him rummaging through the kitchen. A pleasant smell wafted around the room. And he brought coffee into neat, white cups. We just kept looking at each other. I had no experience with apes whatsoever. And I then I finally said something.

Listen, I cleared my throat, and decided to address him informally because he seemed young, but that was just my impression. In truth, I had no idea how to guess an ape's age. For me, you are not the worst surprise here, I said to him. But you can't stay in this apartment... what would the neighbors say...

He sipped his coffee and looked at me. For a moment it seemed that he was watching me rudely, or at least in a way that was indecent as far as apes were concerned.

The orangutan started to, ahem, play with his, ahem, lower body part, I hiccupped even though nothing really surprised me anymore, well, it wasn't even that bad, apes are apes, completely different from us, I don't know what to say...

Two can't live on my salary, I stuttered, even I have trouble getting by, and in addition, I can't afford a pet, you know, pets need regular meals, and here, it doesn't work that way, and this country is not good for pets... and you'd probably want some bananas, too, where am I supposed to get those?

The orangutan didn't make a sound. He crawled into his corner and immediately fell asleep.

I was completely confused. And helpless. The neighbors were just an excuse. I couldn't count on their help because they had been afraid of me from the very beginning. But after a while, I felt sorry for the ape. I covered him with a blanket and went to lie down, too.

In the morning, the whole apartment smelled of coffee again. And it was red. But by then I knew that it was because of Guti's ass. He sat by

the window, scribbling something on the pages of the newspaper and sipping coffee. A cup was waiting for me, too. On the plate beside it, there were two fresh walnut croissants.

Oh, you shouldn't have, I said, I couldn't think of anything better to say. And I had no idea where Guti got the croissants. People had to stand in line just to get bread, let alone... I ate mine in an instant and spent the next half hour licking my lips.

And then Guti got up and caressed me.

In the following days, I noticed that the gray and black streets were becoming a little less gray and black. When I happened to see a small thing in the empty displays I said to myself: I'm going to get this for Guti. I remembered that winter was coming soon and that Guti was naked. At the first store, I searched for a pair of underwear for him. Because they had no cotton underwear, I had to buy nylon, and there wasn't much of a choice, when it came to patterns, either. They had blue ones with large white spots. I didn't like them very much, but I hoped that apes had different taste. When I gave them to Guti to try on, he jumped on my neck because he was so overcome with joy. They were perfect for him.

At first I didn't want to admit to myself that I wasn't thinking about how I would get rid of Guti anymore. He couldn't talk, but he had a lot of other good qualities. Every first of the month I started to give him my paycheck and then he budgeted the money over the course of the whole month. I myself have always hated any type of money management, and I absolutely loved Guti's frugality. Just think, at the end of the month, he showed me my check register and there was always some money left from my paycheck, something which I had never been able to do in these circumstances. And the moments when I scratched his head and said: My sweet little Guti.

Guti also cooked really well. But that little rascal must have known a butcher, otherwise I couldn't explain it. As you know, all citizens get their meat on voucher, four and a half pounds a month per person, any type of meat. But Guti and I had steaks on a daily basis. After a month, I practically begged him, down on my knees, to cook cabbages or turnips once in a while. I couldn't even look at meat anymore. In all the time that we had lived together, this was the only thing over which we almost fought.

The neighbors soon heard about Guti. But then, I had not even tried to hide him. In the building, they thought I was crazy for having come there in the first place, and they accepted Guti as one of my crazy new ideas.

My students, on the other hand, had a completely different reaction to the news that their teacher was living with an orangutan, with Guti. All of

a sudden, they started visiting me more often, under the pretense that they were interested in Slovenian literature, but then, with pockets full of candy, they didn't even come near me—and instead went straight to Guti's room. I was getting a little jealous, but one needs to understand love for animals; it is a completely different thing than love for humans, which is harder, which makes it slower and less common. Guti started making lunch for the students as well and when I was washing the dishes in the kitchen, and listening to the voices I thought about how wonderfully lively our apartment was becoming.

One morning, I woke up and again the whole apartment smelled like coffee. Guti sat at the window, and as usual, he was wearing his spotted underwear, and I saw that he was doodling something on paper. When I asked him what he was doing, he dumped all those papers on my bed without hesitation and with candor. I just stared. The papers contained literally everything that had been happening in our apartment during that time. Guti wrote down everything I told the students, including the things about the queen, Austria, and cows that refuse to let themselves be milked, everything... He wrote down everything we talked about, well, actually, I did the talking because Guti couldn't talk. But I kept forgetting about that, and I forgot even now, as you can see. These writings weren't just regular writings. They were stories. Stories with a beginning and an end. They were sharp, aggressive, didactic, patriotic, emancipated, purifying. The kind I had always wanted to write myself. We embraced.

That same day, I felt him crawl into my bed at night. Let him, the poor fellow, I said to myself. And it wasn't just pity.

In the spring, the first of Guti's stories was published in a literary journal, under my name. What other choice did we have? Guti and I had been prepared for this from the beginning. But Guti was a humble person. He was a writer. An artist. Fame didn't interest him. He wasn't interested in building up his name, or in money. He was happy just with the fact that the stories were published. If I decided to sign his name as well, there would definitely be someone who would ask who this "Guti" was, and if he found out that he was an ape... That wouldn't have worked at all. There definitely be someone, people are like that, who would say that apes shouldn't be allowed to write stories. That literature isn't meant for them. That they should hang on their branches and eat bananas, they say. And they don't care one bit.

And Guti was happy every time one of his stories was published. I had to read them to him up to three times even though he knew them very well. Glimmers of quiet happiness twinkled in his eyes.

After his first publications, he went absolutely insane when it came to writing. New stories were written so fast that I barely had the time to

correct their grammar. Guti's style was, of course, flawless, but as often happens with great authors, he didn't always know where to put his commas. In the end, we revised each story once again, and I asked him if he agreed with all my corrections, then I signed the story, and Guti was over the moon when he could lick the stamp and paste it on the envelope before we sent it out.

Now you know everything. I told you everything.

Is there anything else? – No.

Except for the thing I came here for. Guti has been missing for three days. To put it simply: he is gone.

In all these months, he never left me once. We were together day and night... as you know, it was actually, all day and all night... What are you laughing at? ... I wanted to come here yesterday... that was before I got your message saying that I should come. I wanted to ask you if you maybe know where he is... or where he could be... You definitely know, I said to myself, you always know everything... Maybe you've seen him somewhere in town... You must have seen him somewhere in town... he is an ape... and he is pretty big... in blue underwear with white spots...