



Maja Haderlap
Women at Night

Novel

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Sample translation by Tess Lewis

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For some time now, Mira had found travel difficult. The ease she with which she once packed had become something onerous, paralyzing even. Gone were the days when she would spontaneously stuff her things in a bag and head to the countryside with Martin or to the Rax mountains or some European capital. Lately Mira took care to leave everything in her apartment tidied and organized in case something happened to her. She didn't know where this urge came from and preferred not to think about it. She cleared her desk before leaving, arranging her work papers into neat stacks, and placed the insurance policy file in the cabinet where it could be easily found.

Her periodic visits south where she had grown up were more of a strain on her than she wanted to admit. Although for decades now she was used to returning to her childhood home, the change from the city to village life distressed her. From the outside, her trips home could hardly be called journeys. They were, so to speak, expeditions to her own land, journeys into the heart of her childhood that exhausted her more than extended travel abroad or days of hiking with a heavy pack. She could not even claim that her trips home were like foreign travel—no one would believe her.

When packing her suitcase, she convinced herself that she had to set aside part of her city life. No one had expressly demanded this of her and yet she succumbed to a vague feeling that it was required. As she piled clothes on one side of the bed, she shed part of herself onto the other—her daily rush to the library, her meetings and discussions, her shopping jags and excuses, the evening tiredness, the feeling, despite everything, that she hadn't made it. The filled suitcase reminded her that it was time to leave. Before Mira locked the door behind her, she shut her Vienna life in the closet. It seemed sensible.

At the Wechsel pass, she slipped a John Coltrane CD into the player. The saxophonist's restrained playing dissolved her tension. She responded eagerly to his music as if to someone taking her suitcase out of her hand with an elegant gesture in order to carry it for her.

Stanko's call hadn't surprised her. She had secretly been dreading the moment when a decision would have to be made because her mother, Anni, was becoming frailer with each passing month. Moreover, Stanko had told her that their cousin Franz, who had inherited the small house Anni lived in, had plans for it, so their mother would have to find new accommodations. Mira wanted to put that time off as long as possible in part so she could keep returning home with the same old, rather fanciful expectations, with needs unsuited a person with graying hair. Inwardly, Mira felt sorry for herself, as if she were still an adolescent, even though she knew the time had come when she would have to assume more responsibility for her mother.

The traffic had eased. Mira drove quickly but without hurry. In the many years she had been driving over the pass, the forests on the Wechsel had become a loop reel, familiar and

monotonous. Sometimes Mira would count the bridges and radar boxes she passed or would turn the music up so loud that it felt like she was being carried by a stream of sound rather than driving on a highway.

She planned on staying two weeks in Jaundorf. She did not want to push her mother to a decision. No, not to push Mother, but maybe get her used to the idea of a change. How were you supposed to explain to an elderly person that in the near future, the very near future, imminently to be precise, she would have to move. It was as if Mira wanted to shove her mother onto her death bed, to the last station of a long journey.

I can't do that to her, Mira thought. She would talk it over with Franz one more time although she couldn't possibly talk about this topic with him or even with Stanko. Her cousin and her brother always hemmed and hawed instead of giving a straight answer and if nothing occurred to them, they would ask Mira if she'd ever considered moving back south to be near her aged mother. As if her life in Vienna were a loan that could be recalled at any time. In her family's eyes, Mira was a city person. A city person, they'd call her, by which they meant someone with no ties who pretended she was better than they were, but in reality was little more than a renegade.

After more than thirty years in Vienna, Mira felt as comfortable in the bustle of a city as on a lonely field path. The only thing that gave away her rural background was her habit of referring to herself as a city person. No real city person felt the need to situate themselves as often as Mira did to distance herself from Jaundorf.

The village, however, did not let her go. It downright clung to her. Mira had hoped that with time, the distance between her and the village would increase, but it proved itself tenacious. It pretended to have a memory, more than that, to have a conscience. This was personified in Mira's mother Anni. She was its vociferous mouthpiece. The village believed it had to assert itself constantly against the city girl. It protested against the self-importance of those who had left it.

We here have something to say too, Anni said, we're not such fools as you think we are. We think about God and the world even though we know our village isn't much. What's so great about leaving? Anyone can leave. It's staying that's difficult even if most of the villagers have taken to their heels.

Now that the village had gotten long in the tooth Mira felt she had to be more forgiving towards it. She forced herself to compromise by permitting herself to overlay it with a rather prettified image. As a result, she mixed up the names of the farms and the cardinal points, she remembered buildings and stables where none had ever stood. She transposed some neighboring hamlets and towns to other sites and those that were at some distance she shifted to the vicinity of the village. Now and then, her fantasy village overflowed its borders, swelled impertinently or collapsed in on itself. Before it all became completely mixed up, she would call Anni and ask her about the villagers at length and in detail. She would promise to visit soon, in the near future, for the holidays, very soon.

In her depressive moments, Mira would mentally swing back and forth between city and village life like a pendulum; whenever conflicts arose in her work at the library, she would retreat to her imagined village. This helped her distance herself far enough from her workplace that the

quarrels only marginally concerned her. The lot of you don't know where I come from and what I've experienced, she would mutter to herself as if growing up in a village gave her access to some deeper truth or greater clear-sightedness. She knew this was nonsense, of course, but the idea of it still pleased her.

This village held its own. It intruded insistently into Mira's memories, it ballooned and shriveled, it glowed and faded. The village was part of Mira's face and aged with her. Occasionally it seemed as far as a planet, and yet it still kept her awake at night.

Arms outstretched, Mira pressed herself into the backrest of the driver's seat. The section of the highway through which she was driving seemed to drag on. Patches of woods were repeatedly interrupted by bare, undulating fields in which corn or rapeseed would later flourish. Although the pallid sunlight did manage to accentuate the landscape's contours, the veil of dust hovering over the highway softened them again.

Time to change the CD, Mira thought. She pulled a jazz recording that she had not listened to for a long time from the side pocket. She liked solemn, elegiac soul melodies that made her relax and put her in a melancholy mood. Rarely did a passage in a novel or even a poem provoke such intense feeling as music did, to such an extent that Mira actually experienced music as language and loved it more than all words put together. Sometimes she hummed along uncertainly or sang a few lines here and there, even when she didn't understand some of the lyrics.

Nina Simone sang 'Beautiful Land' as if life were child's play, decked out with melancholy and impermanence. At some point the music faded. A dotted line appeared in the small display window.

Mira was growing tired, and she pulled into a rest stop for coffee. She had covered most of the distance. She sat down in a dimly lit corner of the extravagantly decorated restaurant. The voices of the travelers blended with the hit songs playing over the loudspeakers into a sticky stream of sound. Mira leafed listlessly through the illustrated menu and ordered apple strudel and coffee. After a short rest, she set off again.

As soon as she drove over the Packsattel pass, her childhood village Jaundorf drew closer. It peeled itself out of Mira's memory and initially still appeared lovely and familiar. For a few moments, she was convinced you could sell postcards of it at the rest stops. But with each kilometer, the corners and angles of the village became more distinct. They towered up or spread out. Even recollections of the emanations from the open cesspools and the odor of the damp, slightly moldy wooden planks surfaced. To her astonishment, Mira still had hint of dry straw and the spicy scents of hay in her nose even though the silage bales with their moist, sour smell had overpowered the hay's fragrance.

To the south, the Karawanks glowed in the sun. It must have rained in the night because their bright peaks had grey edges. This distinctive mountain range constantly appeared in a different light, now with craggy contours, now softer again and broader, a congeries of shadows growing up from the plains. Mountains are a synonym for the immutable, but in reality they are changeable, Mira thought, as if they had their own particular mechanism that formed them from within.

Coming from the north, the sky always appeared a shade brighter to her as soon as she crossed the last tunnel. Daylight was milder with a whitish, pale blue tint. Maybe it came from the reflections off the light limestone, she thought, letting her eyes sweep along the horizon. Mentally she recited the names of the peaks and crests, a habit she wasn't sure if she had come up with herself or adopted from Martin.

She exited the highway at Völkermarkt to cross the Drau River and continue on to Jaundorf, heading towards a group of forested crests that formed the southern edge of the Jauntal plain.

Jaundorf had hardly grown in recent decades. It had five farms with cultivated fields and pastures as well as a few workers and farmhands whose houses were squeezed in between the larger properties. A few buildings had been added over the years whether because someone had renovated and expanded a stall or added to the woodshed or whether someone had built a new house for their children and kept the old one as a cottage for the parents or grandparents. Ugliest was the tall feed silo tower, which cast its shadow over the village in the fall when the sun was low.

The village had no center even though a linden tree stood in the middle of it, right next to the paved road that led past the buildings at an appropriate distance. In stories, the villagers gathered under the linden on every possible occasion, but Mira could not remember a single gathering of the kind. In the 1970s, when her family had moved to Jaundorf, the elderly still sat outside their homes and called to each other from time to time. But this habit had also been forgotten since television began to set the evening's rhythm.

Mira was heading straight towards Jaundorf, but the local road veered away just before the edge of the village and led past the houses. Not until the western end of the village could you change directions and enter Jaundorf. Mira turned into the narrow courtyard entrance and parked her car next to the barn ramp. She felt a slight ache in her diaphragm. She got out of the car, stretched the stiff muscles of her neck, and let the car door swing shut. The door to the cottage her mother lived in was ajar. In the entryway, it smelled vaguely of herbs and bacon.

Anni lay asleep in the kitchen on the threadbare divan. Her head was cushioned on her arm, and she breathed through her open mouth. Anni opened her eyes when Mira lay her hand on her shoulder.

Dober dan, Mira said with a smile. Anni seemed disoriented.

I didn't expect you until this evening.

I'm already here, sem že prišva, Mira said.

The first Slovenian words were scratchy. Mira cleared her throat because her own voice sounded somewhat strange to her. As soon as she started speaking Slovenian, a deeper tone awakened in her larynx which never failed to surprise her. She usually spoke with Anni in dialect, in a language that immediately changed her whole bearing. The Slovenian dialect was the gateway to a self-contained world that seemed to have been left behind, populated with people—both living and dead—who wanted something from her. Something that Mira longed for but at the same time rejected. It was a way of speaking that was meant to create a sense of intimacy. Dialect was like a folk costume that could make you visible in an enormous crowd and keep you from getting lost; it was a language that purported to be a safe shore on which you could find refuge and catch your breath. Mira had spent her childhood in this language,

the Slovenian dialect had been a toy chest where she could stow all her wishes, her early fears and insights. Everywhere else she was separated from this language. It lay dormant within her like a secret, it held her forebears' history. It was a childhood language but also the language of her losses, about which Mira herself was of two minds.

Anni wiped her forehead and mouth with a handkerchief.

Have you eaten already? There's endive salad and potatoes. Would you like any?

Yes, please!

Anni hobbled to the sideboard. Her left leg dragged, and she pressed her hands to her hips.

Are you in pain?

A little, Anni said and reached for a bright green plastic bowl with the salad she had prepared.

Mira smiled when she saw the fried bacon strips in the endive salad.

This is delicious!

How long are you staying?

I've got time, Mira said, astonished at her own nonchalance.

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In the supermarket parking lot, Mira stowed the shopping bag in the trunk of her car and walked across the main square of Eisenmarkt. She would have liked to trail her hand along the walls of the buildings to reassure herself that they were in fact standing in formation and had not turned into some *fata morgana*. The facades of the late Baroque buildings were freshly painted.

The region had begun tidying itself up since a few businesses had relocated nearby. At the same time, the empty storefronts in the city center testified to the exodus of small stores and craftsmen to the periphery. The bustle of everyday life had shifted to the borders of town which ran through former fields and pastures. Small villages in the vicinity were also atrophying in the center while new buildings with brightly painted plaster walls and all kinds of fashionable ornamentation—depending on the changing supply in hardware stores—were proliferating along the rural roads or on sunny slopes. These villages no longer formed an ensemble, instead the buildings were a hodge podge, Mira thought.

In the small café on the square, Mira leafed through the regional newspaper. The usual fare: accidents, death announcements, bank crises, property sales, abandoned sites, choral concerts, lost cats and dogs, hive-plundering bears, aggressive green woodpeckers, salami specials, craft and gastronomic fairs, traffic announcements, and brass band concerts. In the local insert was an introduction of the manager of a global company who had bought up large tracts of forestland and several farms in the neighboring region. He claimed that he wanted to spend his twilight years in Einsicht in quiet and relaxation, for which he needed a swimming pool, hunting grounds, and a private helicopter landing pad.

The people at the next table were speaking Slovenian, which pleased Mira. She could still remember the years when no one dared speak the language above a whisper in public so as not to cause a fuss. In Carinthia after the two world wars, the German-speaking majority resigned themselves only reluctantly to the existence of the Slovenian ethnic minority and felt that granting this minority their constitutional rights was a great imposition. German nationalist groups and associations successfully lobbied politicians for complete separation and assimilation of the Carinthian Slovenes. The region's bilingualism was seen as a stain.

Maybe I should brush up on my Slovenian, Mira thought. She could only come up with weak excuses for having let the language lie fallow for so long. Of course, Mira blamed herself for the estrangement. No one had expressly forbidden her from speaking Slovenian. But ever since she could remember, there was something in the air that made her nervous. It had to do with mood and anxiety, with self-image and images of others: all this explained very little and was no doubt came from her training as a sociologist. In fifth grade, she had opted out of Slovenian language classes out of contrariness. It had seemed logical at the time and yet she had been motivated by the fear of making herself seems suspicious through the language. She wanted to see her refusal as a protest against her mother, but she had acted in line with the reigning political consensus of the time. Slovenian was a language of faith, a political stance that challenged the desired German identity of the region. Everyone who went to the language lessons stood out, whether in school or at the bus stop where they waited outside the usual school hours. Mira didn't want to stand out, she wanted to remain invisible.

No one had put pressure on her except her history teacher, Mr. Plautz, who had advised her not to let the Slovenians coopt her. It was enough that she spoke dialect at home with her mother, he'd said. She was a smart girl and a good student. She should think of herself and not let herself get caught in political conflicts, it could only harm her.