The Trial American-Style

by Ewa Bronowicz

> "My innocence doesn't make the matter any simpler, said K. (…) I have to fight against countless subtitles in which the Court is likely to lose itself. And it the end, out of nothing at all, an enormous fabric of guilt will be conjured up." -Franz Kafka, The Trial

"Your first time?" asks a male voice. She looks in the direction where it came from—next to her sits an older Mexican, his jeans dirty, his shirt unbuttoned.

"Yes," she answers politely. Her tone must be just right to let him know she is friendly but also reserved. She shivers as the door opens and invites the wind in. It has been raining since the morning, like the day she first arrived in America. She was twenty then, with one medium sized suitcase, in it a toothbrush and a dream to live the "American Dream." The first year she cleaned houses with bathrooms bigger than her family's apartment in Bulgaria. The second year she enrolled in evening English classes in a small language school in Brooklyn. Since then, she has been improving her knowledge of the language that would eventually open "the door to success," yet another phrase she knew by heart. Working three jobs in order to support herself and pay the tuition, she did not complain. Her dream was an expensive one, and she was ready to pay the price.

"I was here three times." She hears the same voice as before. The thick Mexican accent disturbs her, a reminder of her own foreignness. She smiles reluctantly and looks around. There are four men, all leaning against the dirty-white wall, waiting for the verdict. The room is small but not cozy. An image of a prison cell from some book she read runs through her head. The Mexican who spoke gazes at her with unhidden curiosity. Another one, much younger and apparently shyer, stares at the ground. The other two men are together, taking up the second bench. They are slightly better dressed, one in a clean brown shirt, another one in a white sweatshirt, every once in a while saying something to each other in a language that sounds like Spanish. She has a clear feeling of not belonging in here. And she tries to belong to this country as much as she misses her family, her grandparents who raised her. She writes them long letters filled with her professional achievements, big money and even stories of two men who proposed to

her—a rich businessman who turned out to be boring, and a high school teacher whom she likes but cannot fall in love with. She hates to lie, but the old people don't need more worries. Besides, she is a few months away from completing her English course, and afterwards she will find an employer who will sponsor her for the green card, so that she can work legally and visit Bulgaria whenever she feels like it.

Still waiting, she regrets that she didn't bring anything to read with her. She is afraid to further investigate the room, afraid that the men will assume she is looking at them. But she already knows that the small room with two benches and bare dirty walls and cement dripping off the ceiling like the rain, she already knows that this place is not her friend. It now reminds her of her grandfather's pig house, where the pigs were being fed while waiting to be slaughtered. As a child, she loved to visit the pigs. They would kiss her hands and squirm in excitement; she believed they were friends. Her only friends. Every once in a while they would disappear, and then new ones would move in. Her grandfather told her that the pigs went to America, and on two hooves sold vegetables and fruit in an outside market. She would dream of joining them, planning to tell them how happy she is that they are so successful. One day her grandmother's friend stayed for dinner. They were eating black pudding. Accidentally, she found out the truth. The pigs were not in America; they were in her mouth.

"What car you have?" The man insists on engaging her in a conversation.

"Plymouth Acclaim." It takes courage to look at him for a few seconds. His face is dark and wrinkled; he must be older than his age. "What time is your appointment?" She finally asks, trying to overcome her discomfort.

"Eleven. But is almost twelve. They always make you wait. They like make you wait." His voice sounds resigned, as if the man knew he was being mistreated and accepted it as a fact, another fact that one has to take in without questioning its logic. She learned about those facts in America.

She realizes that he has something she doesn't—knowledge about the place. "My appointment is scheduled for 10.30."

"You put your name in the box?" He says, pointing to a whole in the middle of the wall.

Her eyes involuntarily open wide. “What box?” She cannot believe that she did something wrong, or didn’t do something she was supposed to do. She had to take a day off from two of her jobs—cleaning a house and babysitting—in order to come here. It took her over an hour to drive here, from White Plains to Elmsford, NY, with an office in the middle of a muddy field, otherwise deserted.

“In this box,” says the younger man who has apparently been following their conversation. “You have to put your name, to let them know that you are here.”

“But I told them that I’m here,” she says. She wants to run outside and cry.

“That doesn’t matter. You have to put your name in the box. First time I was here I didn’t do it, and I waited the entire day, and then I had to make another appointment, and that took another month.” He shrugs, and stretches his legs. His snickers are covered with mud.

She stands up, writes her name on a piece of paper, and slides it through the slot. “I don’t understand why they didn’t tell me to do this, when I went into the office before.” She addresses her remark to no one in particular. She sits back on the hard bench. She wonders if the men pity her or if they make fun of her, and whether she lost her chance to get this thing done today.

She received the letter about four months before. It was from the Motor Vehicle Department. It said they made a mistake when registering her car, and that she cannot be granted a New York state title until she has the car inspected. It said that the car may be salvaged. She looked up the word “salvaged” in a dictionary: “Something saved from destruction or waste and put to further use.” She still didn’t understand. She had purchased the car from an old couple. Anna and Paul Armstrong. They told her they had some Bulgarian origins. They told her they were the original owners. And that they took good care of the car. She bought it, knowing nothing about cars, but trusting the nice people. She once heard someone say that old people are the best to buy cars from.

“So this is your third time here?” She now initiates the conversation with the older Mexican to find out more about her situation.

“Yes, miss. Every time they find something wrong. They ask to fix it. Then you have to make another appointment. Pay more money. You wait three or four months.”

“Three of four? I only waited a month!”

"You are lucky."

She smiles; but after a few seconds her smile fades away. She doesn't believe in signs, but if she did, she would have to interpret the trip to Elmsford as a bad sign. "What do they do here?"

"Inspect the car, see if parts are stolen, see if it's okay to drive."

"I bought my car from those two old people, they wouldn't steal any parts." She tells her story. She now feels the need to be friendly, especially to the older man.

"Never trust anyone," says the young man.

She looks at him, surprised. He can't be more than 26, about her age. She wonders what America does to people like them—can a country take away one's faith in people?

The back door opens, and a tall fat man walks to the room. "Which one of you has the blue Nissan?" His voice is harsh; he must be the executioner.

"Mine, sir." One of the men from the opposite bench stands up and follows the fat man. He clearly knows the procedure. The door closes behind them, and a minute later, filled with nothing but silence, the owner of the blue car comes back, and says something in Spanish to his friend. The other one bangs his fist at the wall, and they both walk out.

"He failed," says the old Mexican. "The other was his brother. I see them before. Last week he says to me, "If my car fails again, I have to go back to Columbia." He has no more money. He can't go to work. You can't drive a car with no registration."

She listens to him talk, watches his dry mouth open and close. "I registered mine, but now they won't give me the title. It was their mistake."

"They make no mistakes." The young man stretches again. He must be used to coming here.

The door opens again, and the fat man asks about the Plymouth.

"Yes, it's mine," she says quietly.

"You are late!" he yells.

"I was here on time, but no one told me…"

"Keep quiet!" he says, ignoring her explanation. "Follow me."

She looks back at the men sitting in the room. The old one gestures for her to go to the door. She walks down a long dark corridor, and passes a few closed doors. At the

end, she sees the man turn left. She runs to catch up with him, then bumps into a policeman. “I’m sorry,” she whispers. In America she is afraid of police—she is living and working illegally, and even though thousands of people do and never get caught, she always feels fear. The one she bumps into is very tall and mascular, with a scar across his left cheek.

“Who are you?” he asks, and in panic she forgets her name. She looks at him, and cannot say a word when the fat tall man approaches.

“I told you to follow me. What’s happening, Frank?”

“Come with us,” Frank says.

They move to a garage, and ask her to drive her car inside. She walks to her car, starts the engine, and thinks about driving off, as far as possible. She dismisses the thought and pulls into the designated spot. Outside the left window she notices the fat man show some documents to the policeman named Frank, who says, “You can get out now.” Her hands shake, but she gets out of the car. Both men stare at her. There is another man walking towards them. He is dressed in a gray uniform covered with black dirt and stains. He tells her to open the trunk and the hood. The latter one opens easily, but she could never figure out how to open the trunk. She always uses the keys. She does this as the policeman and the fat man watch her. The mechanic in gray begins to inspect her car. She stands still, near the hood, unsure what to do next. She hears Frank tell someone on his radio to check a long set of numbers. She cannot distinguish his words. She thinks of all the numbers she has been given in America: social security, driver’s license, car registration, cell phone, bank account. Americans are generous when it comes to numbers.

The policeman and the fat man walk into the first door on the right. Soon the mechanic follows them. When he comes out, he looks at her with what she reads as hatred.

Feeling obliged to explain, something, anything, she says, “I bought the car a few months ago. Is it okay?”

The mechanic stops and laughs. She waits. She wants to cry, to curse herself for buying the car from the Armstrong. Curse herself for buying the car at all. But she needed it. In America, without a car one is an invalid without a wheelchair.

The door opens again and the two other men walk out. “Fucking foreigners,” she hears. She is not sure who said it, or whether anyone said it. Frank slowly approaches her. She notices the handcuffs in his left hand. She stands still, unable to move. Random thoughts race in her mind: grandparents, fake social security, the Mexican, her jobs, her school, the Russian boy she began to like. And the pigs. She feels closer to them than ever. “Am I arrested?” she manages to ask.

“Follow me,” he says and smiles.