Ewa Bronowicz

Virus

"Language is a virus, and she infected me," he said and looked away, as if not interested in the effect his words would have on us. It was a rainy Christmas Day in New York City. Basia and I, both Polish, had decided to take a walk along Fifth Avenue and admire the holiday decorations, an activity that, in our minds, represented one of those classic New York moments we felt obliged to participate in. Basia had been in America for nine years, I for almost five; we had been friends since last Christmas when a mutual friend, also Polish, introduced us. There were five of us, all women--one Russian, and two Lithuanian, Basia and I. We managed to form a circle of friendship that transformed into a home, a place we could go to when we had nowhere else to go. Together we loved and hated America, and together we loved and hated our homelands. That Christmas we had decided to combine the customs of our countries and celebrate according to tradition. The night before, on Christmas Eve, we had prepared twelve dishes for the table, all of them vegetarian, and waited for the first star to appear in the sky. We were all standing on a balcony on the Upper East Side, an apartment of an older friend who was away in Russia but who left us the keys and an open invitation to use her place. The air was cold and dry. We had all hoped for snow. The first star was shy and dim, but to us she was the queen of the sky with whose permission we sat down to the table. After the luxurious meal we opened gifts and all of us received the same book, "The Cave" by Jose Saramago. It was Sylvia's idea with the book, a book we would always remember this Christmas by, a book we could all read and talk about, and it was me who chose Saramago's novel which I knew to be an extended metaphor of Plato's idea of the cave, which I knew to be a good metaphor of human experience in general.

Basia was a practicing Catholic, and when I first met her, I thought that we would never get along. She had long blond hair which she wore up or in a braid and big blue eyes which then made me feel anxious because I thought that, the way she looked at me, she was giving me a test in a language I didn't understand. I decided to avoid her until a few months later, chatting in a small circle of friends, we both discovered that we loved art, she classical music and I literature, and that we were both immigrants with ambivalence about our immigrant status working ten-hour days to make our dreams come true as our idealism slowly gave way to tiredness and disillusion. On Christmas Day, while the other women preferred to stay in, blaming the miserable day for their holiday laziness, Basia and I went for a walk with the eagerness of children or tourists. We were approaching the Guggenheim, arguing about whether it would be open. It was not, and as we stood there, a little disappointed and wondering what to do next, a male voice, also in Polish, addressed us.

"The Met is closed too. I used to be more famous than the queen of England, and I have a story to tell."

He was in his late fifties, upstanding white hair, soft face with hazel eyes watching us through brown Prada glasses, shifting his body weight from one side to the other, and then back again, like an actor rehearsing his final moves before an opening night. There was shyness and pride in his tall, slightly bent posture. He wore all black—a black v-neck sweater, a black cotton shirt underneath it, and black wing-tip shoes—except for a long brown coat with large buttons. I noticed that one of the lower buttons was missing and imagined the man a retired philosophy professor who now spent his time

visiting museums and trying to find an audience for his ideas. Not a bum and not a celebrity either, I concluded, and decided to listen, at least for a few minutes.

"Language is a virus, and she infected me. We e-mailed back and forth, fast, without a moment to think. She lived in the suburbs of Vienna, I lived in New York."

"I'm sorry, but who are you talking about?" Basia asked, winking at me. The man seemed somewhat interesting to me, but she wanted to get away. Basia could be tough at times. The night before I had told her I was an atheist and that I would not be going to midnight mass. "You are going," she said, and I didn't dare refuse. She was eight years older than me—we had celebrated her thirty-sixth birthday a month earlier—and she gave me the authority I had never received from my lenient mother and absent father.

The man looked at us, and continued, as if no explanation was necessary. "When she told me to pack my bags and fly over to see her, immediately, I followed."

"Excuse me," Basia was not going to let him ignore her. "Why are you telling us all this?" She looked at me, this time both imploringly and aggressively. She waited for my support. By then, I wanted to listen. There was something hypnotizing about the man. He spoke in beautiful Polish, more literary than scholarly, and, being a daughter of two Polish professors, I would always appreciate this language in all its glory. "Let's just hear the story," I whispered to Basia, although the man, had he been listening, could have easily heard me. Basia stared at me and I could feel the anger in her dark blue eyes.

"I rented a car at the Vienna airport, and drove to the given address. It was late evening, around eleven. I used to be more famous than the queen of England. I stopped the car when I saw light in a wooden cottage. I walked towards it, carrying a dead yellow rose in my hand—I had brought it all the way from New York, but it didn't matter. I

knocked. A female voice from behind the door said something in a language I did not understand. 'It's me,' I replied in English. She asked who I was, this time in English with a thick Austrian accent. 'It's me,' I repeated. 'Go away,' she said. I assumed she wanted to test me, so I played along. I walked back to the car, and watched the light in the cottage for a while. Then I returned to the light, and knocked on the door again. 'Go away, please,' she yelled through the door. Her behavior fascinated me. I continued knocking. 'I am the woman you have been waiting for, I am your princess' I quoted her words from the net. I stared at the light coming through the window, until the light multiplied and surrounded me. I was arrested."

As he spoke, he seemed to be looking at us without seeing us. Had he chosen us at random, in hopes of picking us up? Two young women, often called beautiful, one with short brown hair and the other with long blond hair, both with piercing blue eyes? Had he run into two old Polish women, would he now be talking to them? I wondered if he would invite us for coffee or a drink afterwards. I wondered which of us was his type, Basia in her traditional navy dress pants and a red turtleneck or I wearing my favorite black boots and a knee-length skirt. And yet, this man showed no interest in what other men often noticed first—our physical appearance. And then it occurred to me that he wasn't trying to pick us up at all. Maybe he was a storyteller, dreaming of an audience sitting by the fire. I thought of my grandfather, now dead, who would put us on his legs, me on one and my cousin on the other, and tell us stories about lions talking in human voices, flowers that turned into butterflies, and about the far away kingdoms of kings and queens. "Behind seven mountains and seven forests," he would always begin. Later, when we got older, he would tell us about how he fell in love with our grandmother.

When we could no longer sit on his lap, he would tell us about the war to which he referred to as "the war of 1939," never as the Second World War, and we would pretend to listen, bored teenage girls dreaming about boys and parties, and it was only after my grandfather had died and after I'd left Poland that I became curious about his war stories.

"When I was a teenager, my grandmother told me, 'One day you will meet a princess who will be your future wife, and you will be the only prince she will marry.' I told her that I wasn't a prince, and she just smiled. Even though I wasn't sure what she meant, her words stayed in my head as if glued. It all began at that very moment, first unconsciously, and then with more and more awareness until my search for the princess defined my life."

"It defined your life?" Basia repeated loudly, maybe louder than she'd intended to. An old woman, hunched over and with a faded yellow scarf on her head, stopped next to us. Her face was wrinkled and kind as she smiled without opening her dry thin lips. Her eyes were green and so deep that I thought if I looked into them I would discover the answers to all the eternal questions of mankind. She rested her plastic bags on the ground, and directed her all-knowing gaze and her timid, but perhaps also all-knowing, smile towards the man, also waiting for him to speak.

"I boarded the train," the man went on, seemingly unaware of the new listener who stood slightly to the side. Each time Basia asked a question, he paused, giving a sign that he'd heard it. But soon after he returned to his story. "The Greek woman, the princess-to-be, was the last stop. I knew this intuitively. I traveled around the entire Europe: Warsaw, Vienna, Paris, London. At each stop there was a princess waiting for me. The beautiful princesses would tempt me with their beauty and their charms and their

jewels. If I had gotten off in Paris, I would now be married to one of them. I would have had a life. The waitresses in Krakow…"

"What waitresses?" asked Basia. "I thought you were talking about princesses." While I feel endlessly inclined to interact with strange people, in fact, the stranger the better, Basia's conservatism didn't allow her to leisurely listen to a man who by all means would be classified as "strange." She did not hide her skepticism as she looked up with a sigh, then at him, demandingly, waiting for an answer. The old woman, too, slowly shook her head, and moved a little closer to us. The man still didn't see her, or pretended not to. Strangely, he was not discouraged by the interruption and the lack of sympathy on our part.

"All women are princesses," he said and smiled gently. "I could have had any of them, I used to be more famous than the queen of England, but I stayed on the train, waiting for the one meant for me. My grandmother was right. I thought of her as I was approaching my destiny with a red rose in my hand. And I will tell you what happened, I will tell you," he said looking at me, and for a second I thought that he wanted to thank me for listening. "The train broke down. Some wires caught on fire, we couldn't go on. I cursed the world. I broke the rose in half and threw it away. I wanted to run, I even started to, but she was too far. And I was so close to finding her. So close."

He paused, and, to my surprise, Basia didn't use this silence to ask another question or walk away. Was she, too, becoming captured by the story? Was she, too, flattered when the man said that all women were princesses? In fact, it was much more than a compliment. It was a word of a gentleman who kisses women's hands and who seduces them with his erudition and not with alcohol and bad language, and who says

"forever" and means it. When was the last time I was someone's princess? Four years ago, when a Polish poet invited me to a café and recited Baczynski staring into my eyes that were shining and changing colors like a chameleon. Has it been this long? And Basia hadn't had a boyfriend in seven years, ever since she broke up with a Ukrainian fiancée when she realized that he was obsessively jealous, that consequently her friends would for the rest of her life be limited to the female section of the world, and that, consequently, it wasn't love.

"I have a question for you. Do you spend your whole life waiting for the one and only, even if you may never meet her, or do you settle with anyone, the first person you like? What do you do?" The man looked at us and beyond us, seriously, urgently, as if his entire being depended on our answer. I was enchanted by this urgency and by my native language retrieved back to its roots, to its mountains of metaphors and meanings. It was like last night's Christmas Eve dinner with twelve dishes. When I was a teenager, I never thought much of it. The twelve dishes were an inseparable part of the celebration. Even after my parents had divorced and it was just my mother and I sitting by the table, she would, seemingly unmoved by my laughter, come up with little things, such as bread, counted as one, and *pierogis*, some baked, some boiled, counted as two, all this to meet the magic number, necessary to keep the tradition alive, even though it was a Catholic holiday and we never went to church. It was only after coming to America that I started missing this tradition with nostalgia bigger than New York's skyscrapers. It was also during one such dinner when my mother, criticized by her nine-year-old grief-stricken daughter about why she had left my father, it was then that my mother had asked me the same question. "Do you believe that there is a man destined for you and only for you?"

Startled, I said no, and lied. “I thought that your father was that man. But when I realized he wasn’t, how could I not leave?” She tried to catch my eyes, but I’d cowered and looked away.

“Do you spend your whole life waiting for the one and only, even if you may never meet her, or do you settle with anyone, the first person you like?” The man asked a question that the American teenage children I looked after would find naïve and dumb, especially in the light of their casual and frequent “hookups” with random people they met online, which constituted the modern or postmodern idea of romance; and so would their overworked, never-at-home parents whose only compatibility seemed to lie in discussing strategies for making their eight-million-dollar deals when every few days dropping in at home to say “how are you” to the children, to the grandmother, and to me without waiting for a response and to repack for another business trip that would make them richer. I smiled as the question resonated in my ears like Christmas bells, until I heard Basia say, in a tone soft and whispery as the Polish language, “*Czekasz*.”

“You wait,” I repeated. It was the twenty-first century, and we were standing on Fifth Avenue, but I felt transformed, once again sitting on my grandfather’s lap and listening to a fairy tale and believing it was all true. Occasionally a taxi drove by, the streets of Manhattan was unusually empty, the cold gray day imprisoning both Americans and tourists in their private corners. The old woman closed her eyes, maybe remembering how she herself had waited for the man whom she would later marry and live happily ever after. Her features showed she was a Slav, but suddenly I realized that she must have been Polish to have understood what the man was saying. It was as if the whole universe participated in this act of magic.

"You wait," the man repeated, and his small eyes sparkled from behind the glasses. "I waited. I waited and waited, and at the age of forty I was still a virgin. By then I had lived with a woman for sixteen years. Never consummated our relationship, physically or emotionally. She loved me, but she also knew that she would not save me, that she was not the one. I had told her about my princess. I had told her that she, too, was someone's princess. I thought she understood; we were friends. Until she left, without even saying goodbye."

Shivers ran down my body but I wasn't cold. I glanced at Basia who was standing immobile, like a monument. She had been brought up in a mountain village in a family that to this day owned cows and chickens and their own piece of land on which they grew fruit and vegetables. She must have heard many stories from the *gorals* known to be the storytellers of Poland.

"I used to be more famous than the queen of England, every word I spoke mattered, and they took everything away, left me brainless. They had been rolling my brain for thirty years, and finally succeeded. I am a brainless man. That's why one day I could not wait any longer, I was weak. With the last pieces of reason, I deduced that if I could at least prove to them and to myself that I was still a man, if I could do that, then not everything would have been lost. I went to a Russian prostitute, paid her a hundred dollars; the entire affair lasted less than fifteen minutes, and then it was over. I had lost."

My eyes were moist. The wind blew Basia's hair, covering her face. When my cell phone rang, I barely heard it. It crossed my mind that it could have been the man I was falling in love with, an American radio journalist who after five weeks of intense intellectual discussions and after three weeks of similarly intense sex had told me that,

despite being older than me by ten years, he was not ready to commit and that he would be spending many, if not most, of the following weekends at his mother's place in New Jersey, which in blunt and journalistic language translated into "it's over."

"It was all an experiment. A research assignment. They followed me everywhere I went, they listened to my conversations. If I had won, I could have become president of the United States. Me, a non-US citizen. If I had won, anything would have been possible. But I lost. Gradually, they took my brain apart. One Polish woman wrote me a long letter. The letter was written in my words, in my vocabulary, using my thoughts and ideas. After I read it, I knew that the destruction was complete. That I could not fight anymore. That my princess would never be mine"

"Where did you find these young beautiful women?" We heard a Polish voice from another century. A voice from behind seven mountains and seven forests. It was the old woman. We looked at her. It seemed that the man noticed her for the first time, and also observed her with interest. She looked at us but seemed to gaze far beyond the bare leaves of Central Park visible in the background. Her eyes were still green, but acquired a certain darkness, now shining with a mixture of benevolence and power. I imagined that she was a cross between a babushka and a witch. If she had offered us home-baked cookies or cast a spell on us, or both, I wouldn't have been at all surprised.

"I found them right here on the street," answered the man and courteously lowered his head for a few seconds.

The babushka-witch slowly examined the two of us once again, as if the man's response portrayed us in a new light. "You lucky man," she said after a pause and then

smiled. “You lucky man.” She picked up her bags, and disappeared down Eighty-Ninth Street.