Invisible Mother

Katja Knežević. Croatia

Nowadays that procedure is called “invisible mother”. When at the beginning of last century photography became popular and every family wanted to render itself eternal, even if only with that one portrait, made only once in a lifetime, they would order separate photographs of children. The child, regardless of age, had to be alone in the picture, have its own portrait, its own black and white reflection of the small identity. But photography was still something new, a medium announcing plenty, but not yet giving too much. There was little room for errors and, if the child was too restless, the photograph would turn out too blurry. The product would not have been good, money would have been wasted, and the photographer disappointed, perhaps even more than the family. And this is where the invisible mothers would come to the scene, or rather, behind the scene. The woman would hold the child in her lap, or just hold its hand while being covered by a curtain or a blanket. Thus the child would get its own portrait, although it was never alone. In some photographs, the mother was hidden quite awkwardly, being more than a noticeable part of the set design, as if she were promising that her role in the child’s life would never completely be covered by the curtains of oblivion and growing up. However, in others the trick was so successful that at first sight you wouldn’t even notice someone else was in the photograph, the mother was just a silent part of the space, an invisible fixed point that the child was holding onto while confusedly looking ahead into the unfamiliar eye of the camera.

* * *

I didn’t feel anything when my mom lost her first stable job since we had moved to Croatia. I was a child and did not understand how serious it was because the word “future” only contained the next day in it. Later the “future” fattened up and inflated to the point of repulsion, filled with layers of worries and covered ungainly by the veils of semi-convincible encouragements. Mom had the ground knocked out from under her, but the same had happened with the war and the
escape from Bosnia so she was probably not too thrown by it. It was a shock a bit all too familiar, bearing the promise of its returns. After that she didn’t have a stable job for the next ten years. She, too, must have felt like a child then, as if the future were no more than tomorrow.

* * *

When I was old enough not to be a child any more, but not enough to be an adult, I decided the future would be grand. Because it had to be. Because I was always the best at everything and it went without saying that I would continue to be the best at everything. And even though the present had quite convincing counter-arguments, I successfully ignored it. It is incredible how tall a wall book covers can be when one has to look into this “reality”.

Mom worked as a cleaning lady at the time. And about as far as I was at the time from reality (with my nose in books that would always somehow in advance complicate and explain life), so far was she with her education from the job she was doing. She would clean for 5 hours straight, and then on her way back home she would read books on the tram. Her soul was getting food only in passing. “Mom, you are probably the only cleaning lady in Croatia who pulls out The Brothers Karamazov from her purse in the tram”. She would smile, sad and proud. I would picture her coming out of the school she was cleaning, tired, getting into a tram full of people with turbid faces, anchored in worries of some sort (people in trams always look worried), and Domestos and Dostoyevsky merrily bumping into each other in her purse. But that dance wouldn’t last for long. Neither would her job.

* * *

When I was nearing the end of my studies, the thin line between the imagined future and the real present faded away and the latter completely sank the former. I bounced from books to more distant daydreams.

- Why do you think you have to leave Croatia to be happy? People who run away abroad do not get any further than they would have had they stayed home.

- Mom, how do you not see that there is no future here? No future.

- And supposedly there is out there? There is a crisis there, too. Only you’ll be a foreigner on top of everything. Blue collar workers and scientists go abroad. You are neither.

This is when I fell silent. I had recently
decided that “future” and “abroad” were synonyms, but when I stopped to think about it, “abroad” had no more of a tangible form. Irrelevant. The ultimate uncertainty that begins when you put down your suitcase at a foreign train station seemed and still seems much safer than the certain fear in Croatia.

- You know something interesting I heard recently? - My mom asks me to wake me up from the futile circle of thoughts. - I heard that man experiences his biggest fears in life between the age of 20 and 29. Interesting, isn’t it? Go figure, hai? That age precisely.

- Well, I guess it’s because at that age you feel you have to make a decisive choice that will determine the rest of your life, and you have no idea what that choice is supposed to be. - I retorted automatically, reciting thoughts I had spun in my head endless times hunting for a more concrete definition of the famous post-adolescent angst.

- Ahem, yes, could be... When I think back on that period, it somehow seems dual...

- Dual? - I suddenly raised my head, happy to have discovered that mom had felt halved, too. As if at the same time you had both too much and too little identity; like a reflection in a broken mirror.

- Well, yeah. I remember some nice things and experiences... Going out as a student, hanging out with friends. And, in parallel, somehow simultaneously, that feeling of fear. On the inside you’re like a cold desert.

- Hmm...

- Yes, that’s it. A cold desert.

* * *

Mom frowned and pursed her lips.

- How safe is that?

- It’s safe. Believe me. I wouldn’t go there just like that. It’s all part of this programme... See, now that Croatia is entering the Union, they want to enhance those exchanges of young people between Croatia and European countries... - I recited the propaganda of the international exchange programme. - So, a certain number of responsible people will certainly know where I am and what I’m supposed to do. Get it?

- Ok, how does it work?

- If my application is accepted, I’ll have an interview on Skype and then we’ll see.

- On what?


- Aha. OK then.

The application was accepted.

The night before the interview I dreamed I was walking in the desert. It was very cold. I sat down on the ground, scooped up sand with my hands and let it slip through my fingers. When I lifted my head, I thought I
saw my mom in the distance doing something similar, but when I blinked, I saw it was only a rock that hadn’t turned to sand yet.

When I woke up, I rubbed my hands under water for a long time. It seemed as if the sand wouldn’t get out of my skin.

* * *

- Hello? Can you hear me? Hello?
- Yes, I’m here. Good morning. I’m Katja.
- Good morning, Katja. I’m glad to finally see you, even if it’s through a camera.

The woman looking at me through the Skype window was cheerful, but in a neutral, practiced way. I was nervous. Not so much because of the interview as for the fact that I had to speak French. I had put improvised prompters around my laptop: pieces of cardboard with long, embellished, grammatically checked sentences in French on why I need, want and must get this internship, penned with a red marker.

The woman quickly started chirping about their association and what my tasks would be if they accepted me. When she finished her visibly worn-out monologue, she asked me to say something about myself. I stopped for a moment and took a breath. During the film-long three seconds I found myself facing a choice: Do I tell her the truth or do I read from the prompter? The two Katjas started arguing: Seriously, Katja? Do you really want to play the card of a refugee with a single mother and whine about Bosnia, about Croatia that nobody can find a job in, about mom’s unemployment... Seriously? Do you think you have to reach for that to succeed? Well, no, I don’t think that but, isn’t it more correct to be honest? Oh, is it? Correct, or only very convenient and easy? What if you had grown up in a wealthy family? What would be your trump card then? Don’t be silly; the woman must see optimism and energy, not scrounging. And then it was my turn to give a monologue. Half looking at the prompters, half improvising, I went on about how good I was with people, how I loved to learn new things, how I was good at everything (over the years the two Katjas reached a compromise and decided that I was good, not the best at everything) etc… The woman nodded, smiled, interjected with “D’accord, d’accord” every now and then. She seemed pleased, and I talked more and more and faster and faster. When I finally concluded my speech with a smile, she asked: “And what would you like to do in life for the long term?” As if unable to bear the pressure of the question, Skype froze. For several all too long moments, the woman’s face stood on the screen frozen in a smile. Thus halted in

Sea of words 2012
time, it looked even more unnatural and a bit unreal. Then a few left over words were heard and the connection broke. The window no longer held her face, just a dark screen with grey dots.

We did not manage to establish a connection again. She sent me an e-mail saying it wasn’t really necessary to finish the interview; she had already found out enough about me.

* * *

Three weeks later I received an e-mail that said in a very polite, but still perceptibly distant tone that I had been given the internship and they were looking forward to my coming. That was it. The future was waiting for me abroad.

* * *

- Call me as soon as you get there. I don't care if it’s 3 a.m.
- OK, mom...
- OK. Go. May the dear Lord protect you.
- Yes. Thank you.

I looked over my shoulder towards the gate for my flight and then again at my mom’s face. She looked so excited as if she were travelling, too.
- Mom?
looked at the clouds. Zagreb was no longer discernible; the plane had sailed deep into the unknown. After this point there was only hope.