

Spinach

Like a lot of non-native speakers of a language, even good ones, Nush had a tendency to use some words and phrases more than others, much more than was - from a purely linguistic point of view - appropriate. For a time, *absurd* was one of these words.

'It's *absurd!*' she exclaimed. 'Here I am, a beautiful woman. I like sex. I have always liked it. Why not ? It is one of life's great pleasures. And look at me! I have fallen in love with a man who is not only ugly but he is also *short*. He wears spectacles! And he could lose some weight if he wanted to. A man, furthermore, who does not give button for me! God, I must be desperate. It's *absurd!* There is no other word for it!'

The occasion she chose to deliver this outburst was the end-of-term College party. We were leaning against the corridor wall outside the canteen, holding plastic catering cups from which we were drinking passable Bulgarian red wine, smoking her cigarettes. I am not normally insensitive to the price of a packet of Marlboro Lites for a person on the receiving end of social security, but equally I can recognise a generous gesture when one is made to me. It obviously gave her pleasure for me to accept this small gift from her.

'I have beautiful breasts!'

Nush clasped my right hand - the one holding my cigarette, which she first took from me - and cupped the palm around her left breast.

'You see! Isn't that nice ?'

I wondered how long I ought to leave my hand where it was before I could decently remove it, before one of my colleagues glanced my way.

'Well ?'

'You know, we have a policy in this college,' I said. 'To deal with acts of incitement to sexual harassment.'

'Oh, don't be so pompous! Haven't you ever touched a woman at a party before ?'

The only way to deal with Nush when she was in this sort of mood was to give it straight back to her. You had to fight fire with fire. She expected you to. She despised weakness, especially in a man.

'If you're as fanciable as you claim,' I sneered, 'how come you can't persuade a more prepossessing bloke to smoke your Marlboro Lites with you?'

'Pah! You think I couldn't ? I could - *easily!* I just lack the opportunity to meet real men! God, I haven't seen a good one since I arrived in England! Some of these Afghans and Eritreans and Somalis are very good-looking boys, Khalid, for example, is gorgeous!'

She tossed her splendid black hair with contemptuous respect in the direction of the Afghans, Eritreans and Somali young men who were disco dancing behind us.

'I don't want a *boy* - one who is almost certainly a *virgin*!! I could eat Khalid for breakfast! What I'm talking about is a *man*! Someone I could think to share a couple of bottles of wine with and then take to bed with me. A man with blood in his veins and iron in his blood! Where am I going to meet such a man ? Tell me!'

I couldn't tell her and she didn't really expect me to. I was privy to enough of her recent history and current circumstances to know that she was right. She was in a rotten position. Thirty-two years old, with fine middle-European cheekbones, lovely dark eyes and, I was now able to attest with the authority of experience, beautiful breasts, Nush was the mother of a three-year old girl whose father had disappeared during the recent conflict in her country. Altogether, in the form of family credit and child benefit, she and her daughter received £98.67p each week, which she supplemented with a few hours cleaning. But Nush was a university-trained civil lawyer in her own country, where she had worked in a government department in some or other judicial capacity.

That country, unfortunately, no longer existed. Every vestige of it had gone, vanished into thin air. Men shot their neighbours and the neighbours' wives and babies and left their bodies in the street to be eaten by dogs. The last thing the place needed at this moment in its history was civil lawyers, since every agreed form of civilised behaviour had been abandoned. Each side had adopted a scorched earth policy towards the other, routinely massacring and raping non-combatants as a matter of military strategy.

One day Nush had been swanking up the steps of some prestigious Ministry of Justice in the regional capital wearing an elegant black two-piece ensemble, 15-denier French tights, Italian shoes and underwear of heart-stopping expense; the next, she was sharing a single bed-and-breakfast room off the Edgware Road with an infant daughter who cried all night. She had no money, no family, no status. ('If it were not for my box of photographs, I wouldn't exist! she claimed - or, rather exclaimed, because she tended to speak with invisible exclamation marks at the end of her sentences. 'I would have no past!') Even the few items of jewellery she had escaped with had been stolen during her first fortnight in London. She had lost everything, not least her husband. It was a humiliation to her that she could not afford to buy the cheapest bottle of wine in Tesco's but, instead, went there to exchange for milk the tokens to which she was entitled. She was right. It was *absurd*.

And yet - because of the droll way in which she talked about her misfortunes - it was also very funny. Absurdity no doubt requires this element of pointless hilarity.

I was fond of Annushi Broblinec but I was careful to regard her with a professional eye. With her engaging arrogance and erect posture, dressed up for the party with as much flair as she could muster, a scarlet gloss on her lips, a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, she looked superb - with more than a passing resemblance to Morticia in the Adams Family, as played by Anjelica Houston. She had come a long way from the day in September the previous year on which I had interviewed her for a place on my course. Shaking with anger, shame, resentment and

frustration, a fractious toddler snapping at her heels, possessing only the clothes she stood up in, she had reached the end of her tether. She had burst in to tears. Seven months later, her child had a full-time place in a community nursery; the housing department had granted her a brand new flat; she was following an advanced English course at her local college alongside students from Russia, Eritrea, Somalia, Iraq and Former Yugoslavia. She was also - the truest barometer of her well-being - in love.

Nush was a joy to teach. Refugees nearly always are. The way I do it is to provoke authentic speech acts on subjects that arouse strong emotions. By means of controversial topics - state torture, capital punishment, sexual equality, religious persecution, freedom of speech, the Veil - I try to put the cat among the pigeons. Was there any justice in the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdi ? Should the law punish women and not men for adultery. ? What is liberty ? I introduce items of grammar which they need to negotiate in order to address these important issues. Throughout our discussions, which often become quite heated, Nush sits like a bored sleepy cat, half-watching us, waiting for the moment to strike the pigeons in questions. In her own time, with great passion but also with a civil lawyer's regard for clarity, she demolishes every argument that is reactionary, bigoted or intolerant. In the event of a fellow-student coming out with something truly daft she openly scoffed at his simple-mindedness. She had no deference towards Muslim attitudes to women, for example - having lived cheek by jowl with Muslims all her life. On the occasion young Omar attempted to justify his

view that women could not be fire-fighters on the grounds that they are not as strong as men, she rose from her seat and advanced upon him. Towering over the poor boy she offered to arm-wrestle him on the spot in her hilarious deadpan way. The rest of us were weeping with delight, hooting for Omar to accept her challenge - which he had the good sense not to do.

Omar can take it. Nush can take it. Having been deracinated and humiliated, impoverished and deskilled, they are not inclined to get on their high horse in a hurry. Over the year they draw closer to each other. And also to me, the circus master extraordinary.

Abrehet Solomon, who is nineteen, had been a little girl playing in the yard of her parents' house in Asmara when the rocket struck the house and killed her father. Salima is a Kurdish ex-freedom fighter, mother of five, who carries a fragment of a Kalshnikov shell in her hip, which accounts for her limp. Nina Matrashkova had been a dancer at the Georgian State Ballet in Tblisi. Helen Orlovic is a paediatric nurse specialising in complaints of the ear, nose and throat. In such company, Nush is nothing special.

'Well ?'

'Well what ?'

'Will we go to bed ?'

I wished she would learn not to use verbs in an indicative mood to convey matters that have a doubtful, not to say, unlikely, outcome.

'No!'

I had made a decision a long time before never to sleep with any of my students. To do so would be a to betray a trust. I would not be making an unequal relationship more equal but less so. Although a certain amount of transference inevitably takes place when a professional works with a vulnerable client of the opposite sex, only a prostitute sleeps with a client. As well as my professional qualms I also had a sneaking suspicion that the moment I stepped off my circus master's pedestal and removed my trousers I might have difficulty getting them back on again. I would be setting in motion a chain of events I could not control. I would not be fighting fire with fire but playing with it. At heart I am a coward. Like most cowards I can always find a good reason to avoid taking a risk. If I don't take any risks, I won't make any mistakes.

'You are worried that your wife will find out ?'

Her question had the force, if not the grammatical form, of a statement of fact.

I shrugged. What I worried about was none of her business. In any professional relationship there is always an area that the client does not have access to.

'Oh, you bourgeois little English shit!'

The following September Nush enrolled onto another course at the College and I made sure it was not one that I taught myself. We still bumped into each other in the corridor now and then, or met in the canteen where we talked over the state of her application for refugee status, which had been turned down by the Home Office. She had been granted what is called

Exceptional Leave To Remain, for what that was worth. I put her in touch with a solicitor friend of mine who specialised in immigration procedure, to handle her appeal. I persuaded a local charity to award her a grant. She was grateful to me for this help, although I insisted that she should not be. I was simply doing my job. I had not done anything for her that I would not have done for any other student in a similar position. All I had done over and above the call of duty for Nush Broblinic was to ask my wife to hold back for her little girl some of the clothes that our own daughter had outgrown.

'I'm having a little party for Eid,' she announced towards the end of Ramadan, which puts it towards the middle of May. 'Just a few friends.'

'Why ? You're not a Muslim.'

'Oh, Christ! Don't you start! I left my country to escape that nonsense. Who cares what I am ? Or what you or my friends are? At home we all make little pies and cakes for each other at Eid, Muslim or not. It's a traditional festival. Well, before the war it was. Anyway, if you want to meet some more lugubrious Slavs, you are welcome. You still haven't seen my flat.'

'Thank you. Of course I'll come,' I said. 'I'll bring the clothes for your daughter.'

'Good! You keep talking about doing that.'

'Would you like me to bring a bottle of wine ? Or would that be inappropriate for a celebration of Eid ?'

'Don't be *absurd!* Of course you must bring a bottle of wine! Bring *two!* At home even Muslims drink wine at Eid. We are a

great wine-drinking nation. Well, we *were* - when we *were* a nation.'

It was a warm spring morning. The leaves on the lime trees in the streets of west London were luminous. I was the first to arrive, two bottles of Aussie red under my arm and a bunch of daffodils. Nush, her hair up to reveal her fine neck, looking radiant in a white blouse and shortish black skirt, offered me her cheek to kiss. While we waited for the other guests to arrive she proudly showed me around her new flat, which had been recently redecorated and carpeted. Sunlight filled the almost-empty rooms. I was delighted and impressed. While I inspected the view from the windows onto the communal gardens below Nush looked through the clothes I had brought for her daughter Anna, dresses and t-shirts that my own daughter had worn two summers before.

'They're *adorable*!' she cried, melting at the sight of the expensive labels.

For a moment I thought she was going to hug me so I opened one of the bottles of wine and poured us each a drink. Despite - or perhaps because of - her happy mood I began to feel uneasy. Something wasn't right. I hadn't half-finished my glass before the penny dropped.

'Where's Anna ?'

'She's staying with some friends.'

I glanced in the direction of the door to the flat, without holding out much hope that it would open.

'You bitch!'

Nush looked at me aghast, pretending to be shocked.

'There isn't going to be a bloody Eid party, is there ? Nor any other lugubrious Slaves to meet! You brought me here under false pretences!'

Unable to maintain the fiction a moment longer, she exploded into laughter.

'Peter! If you could see your face!'

'Bugger my face!'

'I *will*, darling - if you just give me the opportunity!'

Now it was my turn to be shocked. I had no idea that she possessed such a firm grasp of the vernacular. There was a worrying intimacy in our exchange of taboo language.

'Please don't be angry with me. How else could I have persuaded you to come here ? Now we can have a nice quiet lunch - just the two of us. And it's such a lovely day. I've made spinach pie - and baklava. These are traditional on Eid in my country. I hope you like spinach.'

'I hate it!'

'Well, it's what your going to have to eat.'

She refilled my glass, relishing the absurdity of the situation: the adorable circus master had stepped into the tiger's cage. I prowled the room, alarmed and ill at ease. I had stupidly strayed from my safe professional territory into the emotional battlefield that for this woman was a normal, if not a desirable, state of affairs.

On the mantelpiece in a cheap Perspex frame was a photograph of a man in a linen suit seated next to Nush, who was wearing a sleeveless summer frock and was looking very beautiful, happy in

the dappled sunlight. The photo had been taken under leaves, at the conclusion of an *al fresco* meal. The man looked Italian, I thought, or perhaps it was just his suit that did. He had a moustache and an irresistible charmer's smile. A real man. They were leaning against each other, his right hand embracing her sun-browned shoulder. Grinning at the person holding the camera, they both looked a bit drunk.

'Is that your husband ?'

'He's my daughter's father, if that's what you mean.'

'Where is he ? Do you know ?'

Nush shrugged.

'I have no idea.'

'Do you think he's dead ?'

'I would have heard through the Red Cross if he was alive. As you know, I'm no optimist. My fear is that his body is lying in a hole in the ground somewhere in the hills around our city, being eaten by ants and worms and - those disgusting wet things...'

'Slugs.'

She turned the photograph to face the wall.

'He could have left when I did but he chose to stay - although he could not have stayed and not fought. That would not have been possible. They would have shot him anyway. By then a man had to take sides. There was no middle course, no room for a stupid English compromise. I didn't want him to stay but he said that if everyone ran away from the country it would mean the country wasn't worth fighting for and who wanted to belong to such a country ? He refused to run away. He preferred to die.'

'If he is dead, I know he died with his face to the enemy, as we say in our language. He was a *man*, you see.'

She let her lovely dark eyes rest on mine for a moment, but not as if she were measuring me for her daughter's father's linen suit that she had no use for anymore. She wanted me to take her in my arms and hold her, to embrace and take responsibility for her bruised and desperate passion. I did nothing of the sort and the moment passed - as such moments do if you wait long enough, I've found.

'I'm sorry for all those horrible things I said to you at the party. I didn't mean them, you know.'

'Why are you sorry ? My wife thought you hit the nail on the head.'

'My God! You mean, you *told* your wife! She must think I'm a terrible person!'

'You *are*!'

'I was cross at you because you were being so *absurd*. You're not as ugly as all that - nor so short. And I think your spectacles are *adorable*! I could never consider going to bed with a man I really thought was ugly.

Adorable was her latest favourite word.

She moved towards me. Pulling me closer to her by the lapel of my jacket, she placed her left cheek against mine and spoke softly into my ear.

'Do you forgive me ?'

Just as softly, but with an emphatic downwards intonation, I told her.

'*No*!'

We sat down and ate a nice quiet lunch together, just the two of us, drinking some more than passable Australian red wine while daffodils adumbrated the English light. The truth is, I am not all that fond of spinach, never have been, but in Nush's pie the leaves had been chopped very fine and mixed together with some other creamy and spicy ingredients, then folded into what I believe is called filo pastry. I had to admit that it was delicious. I told her it was adorable and so, pleased, she pressed a second slice on me, assuring me that fresh spinach possessed remarkable restorative properties and put iron in the blood. It has what is especially necessary for a man.

We finished the first bottle of wine and then - thirsty after a hilarious and fond remembrance of Omar, Khalid and other members of her old class - started on the second.

'You see! I bet you're glad no one else is here *now!*' she said.

Then we ate her delicate baklava, accompanied by an unusual alkaline fromage frais. For a civil lawyer she wasn't half a bad pastry cook. At the end of the meal she gathered up the plates and pushed her packet of Marlboro Lites across the table towards me.

'Will we have some coffee ?' she said.

'How should I know ! I'm not a clairvoyant,' I teased her.

'Yes, of course. *Shall we ?* would be better. *In a suggestion the future is coloured by doubt. It isn't a statement of fact.'*

I lit and smoked one of Nush's cigarettes while she prepared coffee in the kitchen. After a few moments she returned holding a tray with an Italian espresso machine on it, a bowl of sugar and a

bottle of clear spirit of some sort without a label. Her long black hair was down, falling onto her bare shoulders, concealing her fine neck. She had removed her skirt and top and was wearing only a black bra and matching panties.

Unselfconscious, proud of her superb body, clothed or unclothed, she placed the tray on the table, sat down opposite me and began to pour out the coffee as if in her country the removal by your hostess of her skirt and blouse and tights in the middle of an Eid party was a perfectly normal event. To be expected even.

'Sugar, darling ?'

I could - and should, I suppose - have left then and there, but I didn't. I had consumed too much wine and, I hoped, enough spinach. In Nush's world there is no middle course, no room for a stupid English compromise where the nice qualms of a coward can flourish. A man, if he is a man, has to stay. He has to stand and fight fire with fire. I couldn't have stayed and not faced the enemy. That wouldn't have been possible.