Eva Koťátková – Gallery 4 Transcript

I’m on my way to work, there’s something in the air and in my body. I have a feeling today is not going to be the usual. That there will be a downpour, regardless of where it comes from, whether from inside or outside – for me it’s usually connected.

I walk in through the side entrance for the staff, as always. I’m usually one of the first, but today we all meet there at around the same time. “I couldn't sleep”: says Věra. “Me neither, I tossed and turned from 3 a.m. waiting for the alarm to go off”: says the new one (I don’t know her name yet, we haven’t had time to introduce ourselves). Miroslav complains that he has spots again. The others also look sleepy, as if they might not even have gone to bed.

There’s a palpable nervousness in the kitchen.

The Chief of Security comes in, “In 5 minutes, in the lobby, hurry up. Whoever’s late won’t hear the introduction!”. Věra quickly sprays perfume on herself, she always overdoes it. “I mark the halls like this”, she often jokes. It’s true that I can recognise her two halls ahead. That way it’s easier to meet on lunch break, otherwise we basically don’t see each other.

Transfer to the lobby.

Miroslav complains of pain in his hip. He says that he could use any joint from the mammal exhibit, he says he’s already picked one out: “The monkeys won’t miss it anymore”. He waits a moment for a reaction, but there’s no laughter this time, we all have to do our best to climb the stairs as quickly as possible without twisting a foot.

The lobby. The Chief of Security and Mrs. Deputy Director. There are twenty-nine of us, only two have excused themselves for today.

“Good morning, thank you for being here, we’ll deal with the absentees later.” He whispers to the Deputy: “I wouldn’t count on them anymore”. We open in an hour, so let’s get right to it. As you know, the building has been renovated and the locations for the fire and other alarms in the building have changed. The training for this was already done last month, except for one, you all attended. He whispers to the Deputy: “I wouldn’t count on that one anymore”. Now we’re going to have to check your physical fitness. Let’s take two minutes to prepare….”.

The lobby is buzzing, none of us counted on this. Especially today, when all our bodies are so unexpectedly indisposed, as if we’ve been struck by a group virus, a collective insomnia, an epidemic of fatigue. Věra signals to the Chief of Security, pointing at her heels. Without thinking, he says sternly: “A fire won’t let you change your shoes, either.” Miroslav loosens the button on his shirt. In the hall, breathing can be heard as preparation and as an expression of nervousness.

Chief of Security: “When I say five, we’ll rush upstairs, meet me on the second floor by the alarm. The time limit is two minutes, try to get there as quickly as possible. Everything clear?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer: “1, 2….and 5! Let’s head upstairs!

There’s confusion in the hall. The staircase is wide enough, but it’s as if the bodies are unable to silently agree on which way to go, rolling over each other in panic, two of us falling before reaching the stair landing. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Miroslav surrender. He sits down on the stairs: “I’m not letting myself be bullied”. I'm climbing to the first floor, I don’t know where I left Věra, but there’s no time to look back or stop. My leg stings and I can barely catch my breath, there’s a struggle for the handrail on the right, so I choose the left part of the staircase - there are only two of us. It looks like Jana, even now she’s holding her purse as if she’s carrying diamonds in it. She pauses for a moment to catch her breath. I take advantage of this and overtake her, the fight for the handrail is relentless, although I feel ashamed of it. Another landing, the second floor is already in sight. There are only a few custodians in front of me, most of them younger, the majority of the group is behind me. I run to the alarm, where a few bodies are leaning against the wall, breathing deeply bending forward. I see more bodies scrambling up the stairs as if absolutely everything is at stake, but they are running out of energy. The Chief of Security is upstairs with his cell phone in hand. He’s counting down the seconds to the end of the time limit: “56, 57, 58, 59, time!” The bodies still on the stairs are too late. In my mind, I admire Miroslav for giving up so heroically and standing up to them with his resignation.

Chief of Security: “You who made it within the time limit, congratulations! Unfortunately, we have to say goodbye to those of you who arrived after it. We cannot afford to risk the safety of the building and those who visit it. We’ll deal with you on the third floor to pay out the last of your wages.

I’m speechless. I want to scream, but there’s nothing I can do, my facial expressions won’t obey me in my exhaustion. I catch my face doing whatever it wants, I think it’s even smiling towards the management. The complete opposite of what I’d like to express or say. A little fewer than half of us have made it in time. Neither Věra nor Miroslav are with us. There are a few personal items lying around on the stairs like after a match. The management tells us to restore the staircase to its original state: “We’re opening soon!”

Same day, 30 years before:

I’m standing at the back wall of the hall, looking at her. Lenka....we have the same name.

It’s no coincidence that they put me with you, I think to myself. I speak almost as little.

It seems to me that people waste words without really needing them.

I'm also rather small for my kind. “5’10” is no great achievement,” my mother used to tell me. "You’re going to have to try hard. Speak up, enunciate properly, so they’ll even notice you at all. For a lot of people, you’re outside their field of vision”.

My husband told me I captured him with my sad look. You have it, too, I dream about it sometimes. “Those eyes of yours, I dreamt of them until I had to marry you. And your eyes never changed”.

There are a number of other animals in the hall, perhaps more attractive, judging by the crowd of children at the lion or tiger display case, but you’ve had my attention from the start.

Once, on a Tuesday when fewer people come, I was behind the display panel adjusting my tights, they were misbehaving that day, and suddenly I notice - the mole above my knee is the same shape as your spots. Sometimes I look at them and read their shapes like clouds in the sky.

I’ve had a few job offers over the last few years, but I’ve always ended up not wanting to leave, partly maybe because of you. I might not find that kind of alliance anywhere else.

I felt like I was in the same boat as you: also stuffed to last, also transplanted.

I have hot flashes, then cold flashes that almost turn to shivers, I’ve always had cold limbs. When I bend over for something, I get dizzy. That can’t happen to you.

One time there was a big storm outside. A few windowpanes fell out onto the sidewalk in front of the museum and nearly fell on a little girl who was walking home from the museum with her father.

Visitors who had already left were returning to the hall to wait out the weather. It was thundering outside, streams of water on the streets, and inside a multitude of people crowding among the exhibits. I have to be careful that the animal and the human don’t mix too much, that visitors don’t lean on the bison, that someone doesn’t hang their coat on the deer’s antlers… The hall is as noisy and pressurized as a boiling pot. I have to raise my voice for anyone to even hear my safety warnings. Suddenly, from the direction and height of your head on your long, stiffened neck, I hear without you even opening your mouth:

I’m a giraffe who didn’t have a chance to grow up

I’m a body that shouldn’t be here anymore

1954

When I was taken away from my mother, I felt like the chosen one

Sedatives for the journey, months of acclimatization

The attempts to feed, the longing for others of my kind

They came to watch me through a fence

Others measured me, weighed me, looked at my fur, sent me feces for analysis.

They put a sign on the fence of my enclosure: The first giraffe in the Prague Zoo

1956

When I died - and it was all moving towards that - they decided to donate me to a museum

Transportation was expensive, so was my care

Stuffing seemed like the best way to recoup their expenses.

By making her immortal, we’d be providing the country with a steady income, they reckoned

It might come in handy in times of crisis.

More such giraffes, said the others! Too bad she hasn’t grown up much...

When I was taken to the prep room, the measuring phase began

Who would have expected a replica to be created, but this was the model that would soon fill my insides

They built a pool with a pulley, set up the prep tables, connected tubes to the sewer

Then they started dissolving my insides.

Strong lye due to lack of time, then the insides dissolve “on their own”

All that will be left is the skin, which then needs to be thinned.

I’ll be like tights, ready to be fitted onto a more or less faithful model

We’ll see if they’ve made a mistake in the measurements, so that I don’t end up like some of my predecessors, who, when sewn together, have become a new species, far removed from the original.

I can feel myself draining, dissolving.

I can feel myself turning into a cocktail and heading for the drain

My body is flowing out of the museum and passing under the square

I feel free, I'll soon be everywhere

If my skin, like my organs, could escape them

But their vats and sewing machines are too alert for that. Nothing can fool them

I’m not just flowing through the pipes, I’m flowing through the air

I’m coming up through the grates of the sewer, mixing with the air outside.

With the fumes and musk that emanate from your bodies

You who are crossing the square now have no choice:

You breathe me in and out, I become part of your body.

You are giraffes in human skin

You allow me to not be alone for a moment.

Our stories have intertwined - they were never separate

How do you feel now? Now that you know?

Who among you remembers seeing me alive behind bars?

And who among you will come to see me now that you know?

Do you dream of me? Do you think of me while in line for fruit?

Are you itching? Have any spots appeared on your skin?

How are you feeling in your bodies? Where do they begin and end?

Who put into your head the idea of separate bodies like islands floating in emptiness?

How do you feel now? Are your legs unsteady?

Then the closing of the upper part of the square due to a “strong health-threatening odor”

I didn’t say my story was going to be pleasant. No such promises were made.

Then they pulled my husk out of the lye

They tanned it, stretched it onto the plaster model

They sewed and glued

They ordered eyes

And so it stands here to give a report about a giraffe, like in a science class, where you also don’t meet a living creature: how much it measures, weighs, eats, how it reproduces, and so on.

All this happened without me, I went home in human bodies

Who passed the news of me on to other bodies, and they to other bodies, and they to their children.

And so I may be in you ....or in you....or in you....