

Lonely Women

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You can't breathe—it's stifling in a department where all the workers are women. Most of them have grown old here as well, and it often seems that misery rules in this place. When you are always in the company of such lonely women, you anticipate that a similar fate awaits you, too. Yet they are all wonderful people and good housekeepers, except for being excessively modest, shy, and indecisive. They never go anywhere, knowing only the way to work and back home again, so they have never managed to find a fiancé and in their hearts they bear a great grudge against this world and this life. When they see that you are still young and not yet withering away here in the department, they want to advise you to chuck this job, simply to tear yourself away from this loathsome place, because out there—somewhere else—you might just meet someone and marry him and then you would have your own family, have children. But actually they are envious that, unlike them, you can still be happy, and because they feel that way, they are angry with themselves; at such times they become impatient and pick on one another over matters of no consequence, which inevitably leads to squabbles and ends up with everyone involved breaking down and weeping hysterically. On days like this, their boss, an unhappy woman no different from them, sends those who have been quarrelling home early. The following day they come to work feeling guilty and tearfully apologize to one another, and then from their bags they take out a delicious pie or cake (there's never a shortage of coffee in the department, by the way) and invite everyone to come to the table and help themselves. Some of those present rather timidly suggest to the boss that another kind of contribution might not be amiss, and then those who had been involved in the squabbling blush and lower their gaze in embarrassment, because they have actually brought along some of the strong stuff. But you know in advance that the boss will very firmly say “no,” and indeed she does. That's because on one occasion, you surmise, she must have agreed to it; then, after finishing off a bottle of cognac, and eager to maintain their feminine daintiness, they went home and behind closed doors were bored out of their minds, even more so than before, and no doubt quietly went on drinking. To shut everything out. And then it occurs to you that when the boss realized these unhappy women might become addicted, she banned them from bringing any form of alcohol to work. You imagine how the women used to come to work after such binges—quite depressed, with aching heads, yet all trying hard to appear

cheerful and happy, though aware of the futility of the act they were putting on and asking themselves despairingly, "Oh God, when will this comedy they call life come to an end?" When you first came to work in the department, you still witnessed the aftermath of rowdy birthday parties, but the boss banned birthday celebrations as well, because every year brought more gray hairs, progressively more difficult to dye convincingly, more wrinkles on the face and neck, progressively more difficult to mask with rouge. And you watch the women's complexions change as they age along with the women themselves. Nothing can restore their former freshness now, though their cheeks may momentarily acquire a pinkish glow if they drink a glass of cognac—but the boss is adamant.

Sometimes you wonder what keeps these lonely women in the department (and you too, of course). After all, the pay here is minimal, and the prospects are not great—you can become a senior worker in the department, and that's it. And it isn't likely that one of them will be made head of department, since there is only one department and it's already got a head their own age—anyway, that position is usually filled by an external appointment.

Is your work actually of use to anyone, you sometimes wonder. After all, people live quite happily without it, and you wonder why the state created this department and others like it in every large city in the country. And you remember reading somewhere (was it in Kafka?) that in ancient China, the village assembly used to elect one of their number to the position of community idler. He would sit in the shade with a cool drink while all the others toiled away under the baking sun (building the Great Wall, perhaps?). You try to understand why the ancient Chinese did this but you can't concentrate, because something else is occupying your mind: in contrast to the idler, you dutifully come to work day in and day out. All day you work conscientiously, but you don't actually gain anything at all from it, do you? And since to you your work seems to be of no use to anyone, your arms drop to your sides, you lose heart, and you even begin to envy that community idler back in ancient China his ability to accept his role so philosophically. At times like these, you feel the lack of air in that stifling department, which often seems to be a living creature that has hypnotized all of you here, binding you forever in chains, like slaves in a galley. And you no longer have the strength to sit here. You haven't! No, you have not! You want to tear yourself away, to escape, just following your nose, but you can't, because you feel completely deprived of your own free will. This is also the effect of that living creature, the department. You try to cool down by thinking other thoughts; you tell yourself, don't fill your head with all kinds of nonsense. All these notions about the department are pure nonsense. You're not really slaves. Aren't you doing things you chose to do of your own free will? Don't you feel free, actually? When men stop by at the department, all you women engage in witty conversation with them,

cracking jokes and smiling charmingly at them, and they are always extremely polite. You smile at the men yourself and joke with them, and you observe that they enjoy your company. It has even happened that such men have invited you for a cup of coffee, and you even had hopes that you would start seeing someone. But this department must be a real curse—those who previously took an interest in you later began to avoid you, even though you are an attractive woman, not some dog—that you know, because you see yourself in the mirror every evening and see that you have a fine, attractive body. And again you are beginning to think that the spirit of the department has penetrated your body to such an extent that it drives men away, just as they were repelled by those unhappy women that you work with and have already grown old here. So you shut out the bad thoughts, consoling yourself with the knowledge that you still have everything to look forward to and again you try to focus on the ancient Chinese.

Occasionally you feel like asking the boss for time off to go on an imaginary date, but you realize that the women in the department have already been through this phase themselves, that they will easily see through your pretense and will pity you and give you sorrowful looks—and you don't want anybody's sympathy. Because you know that somebody else's sympathy would make you feel even sorer for yourself and you might burst into tears in public, which is precisely what you don't want to happen, because you hate looking pitiful. Once again you try to understand the significance of the story about the Chinese idler and you can't find the answer. In the end you conclude that not everything under the sun makes sense or can be explained logically, yet it's all brought about by something or other, even if it is as senseless as this life of ours.

Every Saturday you buy a bottle of cheap Isabella wine, since you can't afford brandy on your wages, and in the evening you take a shower (as the other women in your department do, you recall), sit down at a table laid for two, and drink your cup of sorrow in silence while the second glass stays untouched. Your youthful body burns with desire on the pure white sheets and your lips search in vain through the emptiness for a man's lips. You weep softly, overcome with despair, because you will never, ever get over that wall—invisible to all—that cuts you off from the world. On Monday, you dutifully turn up for work, and it starts all over again, just like last week, last month, last year, and the years before that. From time to time, various things may happen—once again someone loses her temper, and once again a quarrel breaks out among the women—but the next day all is sweetness and light once more. Sitting at a table stacked with good food, you're thinking one couldn't wish for anything more. The only thing missing is men. Men, who might be captivated by fine womanly cooking and baking and, what's more, by the women themselves.

There's nowhere to dash off to after work, so every day the women spend a long while saying goodbye, wishing one another all the best; then

with heavy hearts they all go their separate ways, to homes where nobody is waiting for them. And you do the same, you feeling that you are becoming more and more like them. One day, just recently, when the boss was sending them off home, you thought—good heavens, for these women you work with the department that they all hate is actually a refuge, in fact, from their loneliness. Like a wall, it shuts them off from human happiness, the sight of which is painful for them all. In the department, they all find peace and quiet—even if it is pervaded by the evil spirit of unhappiness.

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Original publication: Vasyl' Gabor, "Samotni zhinky," in his *Knyha ekzotychnykh sniv ta real'nykh podii* [A Book of Exotic Dreams and Real Events], 2nd ed., Lviv: LA Piramida, 2003, pp. 54–57.