



Eva Ferry

A man counts years

In a flat in a capital, a man sits counting years and days. The man—the Associate Professor—finishes his counting and then hesitates.

The Associate Professor is—was?—an exile. In his youth, he decided he did not wish to share his country with a dictator who pillaged, imprisoned, terrorized, annihilated. He left and lived in exile for just under thirty-seven years. For decades it seemed as if the dictator would never die, but he finally did (at eighty-two), and the Associate Professor came back.

This was thirty-eight years and one hundred and forty-two days ago. The Associate Professor has now been back home for more than a year longer than he was gone. For seventy-five years, his name has been coming up in the lists of shame -- the lists of those the country spitted out of itself. Such lists first circulated clandestinely among the internal resistance. After the dictator died, the names were said out loud—proudly, confidently, somewhat mechanically after a while, a list to be memorized and recited by obedient pupils from their desks.

He wonders, with some embarrassment, whether the time has come to ask for his name to be taken off the list. Not that he occupies a very prominent place in those—certainly not first,

not second; halfway through, most of the time. Hopefully, most people won't realize that it is only a third of his life he has spent outside his country—and going down by the day.

Certainly, from his two-bedroom flat in a former working class neighborhood, the years he spent teaching Composition at a state university in the American Midwest seem like a blip. He thinks of the Composition Intermediate undergraduates he abandoned halfway through the semester at the news of the dictator's death. Some of them will now have grandchildren. They will hardly remember, if at all, that one morning they walked into a classroom to find their teacher had deserted them, leaving a farewell letter that the Associate Professor thought was quite poignant but in retrospect he realizes was quite cliché.

The aspiring composers, for all their kindness and enthusiasm, regarded him as an old man during his last years in the Midwest. They raised their voices and painstakingly explained references to popular culture he may not have gotten by virtue of his age.

They are old themselves now. They have joined him in old age, which surely they used to regard (and maybe some still do) as the last, very brief step.

What no one tells you when you're young is that old age lasts forever.

A year goes by. The Associate Professor hardly leaves his flat. *I'm too old*, he tells himself. But the usual symptoms of old age are reluctant to manifest themselves. There is no reason why he shouldn't go out: his heart beats stubbornly, his legs feel vigorous and well-irrigated; more so than they did at sixty-two, when he cursed in his native language after his office at the university was moved to the fourth floor—and this in a building with no lift. More so than they did at eighty-three, the worst winter the city had seen in a century.

That's what the meteorologists said anyway, but no one could confirm it.

Another day, the Associate Professor hears on the radio that it's forty years to the day of the dictator's death.

He remembers how, when they were both alive, he came to think of the dictator as an older brother. Close enough that they lived in the same house at the same time, brought up by parents who still hadn't made it to middle age, but distant enough that they were never at school together, danced to the same songs or

fell in love with the same girl. An older brother whose primogeniture went to his head.

Now, with the dictator frozen forever at eighty-two, the Associate Professor realizes he's old enough that he could be his father.

The thought pleases him. As a father, he can sit the little bugger down and give him a talk, a row, a good smack on the bum. *What is it that you are you up to—tyrannizing a country for thirty-seven years? Do you think that's a way to earn a living? And sit up straight, for God's sake!*

Years go by. The Associate Professor's heart beats stubbornly, his legs vigorous and well-irrigated - but why should he leave his flat now? All the exiles who returned around the same time as him, the few old friends he reunited with after his return, are now dead (and thus lost to him twice).

Some people presume him dead, too. One day, in one of his rare outings to the local library, he noticed a new *Encyclopedia of Our Music and Musicians* on the shelf. Out of vanity, he looked himself up.

They gave his date of death as 2002, which is twenty years ago from now. This made him chuckle.

Sometimes, especially at night, he wonders whether something is wrong with him; whether God or nature has left him alive deliberately. A fossil, a living example—what of, he doesn't know.

One day he notices it won't be long before he is old enough to be the grandfather of the dictator, who has been frozen at eighty-two for almost sixty years now.

This makes him very sad.

It is the first time he's felt sad since he came back. The deaths of friends, he expected. The memories of long-gone places grated for a while, but it is amazing how quickly one can get used to a new favorite cafe, a new favorite park. The realization that, perhaps, history had passed him by disconcerted him for a while, as he had always thought his generation would manage to elude that trap, but he cannot say it made him sad.

Imagining himself as the dictator's grandfather, on the other hand, plunges him into profound sadness. Because a father can educate, correct and punish, but granddads spoil. In fact,

granddads were invented for the purpose of spoiling their grandchildren.

He imagines himself shaking his head condescendingly as the dictator plows on, like a capricious child, with his sinister program of executions, censorship, exploitation, mass imprisonments, pillage, torture. He imagines himself thinking *Well, he's in the age to do so. He will grow out of it.*

I myself did that in my childhood and youth.

The Associate Professor crumbles down on his armchair. For the first time since he came back to his country, he cries.

Originally from Galicia in Spain and a resident of Glasgow in Scotland, Eva Ferry's fiction and non-fiction work has been published or is forthcoming in *Salome Lit*, *The Public Domain Review*, *The Cold Creek Review*, *Foliate Oak*, *Adjacent Pineapple* and *Novelty Magazine*, among others.
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