

A Brief History of The Movement by Petra Hůlová

Translated from the Czech by Alex Zucker

2018 | Torst

Excerpt from Chapter 1

I had a suitcase, that was it. My mother's old suitcase with wheels, the one that she used to take with her on business trips, crisscrossing the old world, until the doctor told her she had to stop, because of her varicose veins.

It was late July, gruelingly hot, the temperatures that week were record-breaking. I forgot my bottle of water on the bus that I took from our town to the one nearest the Institute. In our town, all we had was a recruitment office.

The woman at the recruitment office told me that the Institute used to be a meatpacking plant and its current purpose was ongoing "small-scale" work. It had a capacity of such and such, its own brain trust, and, thanks to the generous support of its (all-female) donors, it could concentrate on its mission without compromise.

I already knew all that, of course, but the deciding factor for me was the availability of housing for out-of-town employees.

When I informed my mother, she was delighted.

"Live your dream," she said. "And never give an inch," she added as I walked out the door, dragging that awful suitcase behind me. It was a quote from a Movement campaign that nowadays no one remembers, and even at the time my mother and I found it a bit silly. Because you have to define what it means not to give an inch or the Movement ends up sounding like some Nazi feminist offshoot slash self-appointed dictatorship of spoiled princesses, when in fact nothing could have been further from the truth.

The clients' bedrooms are dark. Lights out is at ten thirty, a policy the clients adopted themselves and submitted for approval, which the board rarely withholds. At the moment I can think of only one recent case, a seemingly mundane request to have mirrors installed at the Institute, to which the board replied as follows: "We mirror one another within ourselves. Not only women in men and vice versa, but also men within their own sex."

The request for mirrors was denied. Thus, in typical old-world fashion, the fundamental idea of "Looking into the world and at it" was inverted to "Looking at oneself with the intention of altering one's exterior to advertise oneself to others as an object for visual consumption, thereby turning human beings into objects whose exterior is elevated at the expense of what

lies within.” I remember that the board’s decision seemed a bit overzealous to me at the time, but now I understand and fully approve. The most unyielding walls of the old-world fortress are the walls within our minds. Although the Movement has been triumphant in most of its battles on the battlegrounds of the world (in our latitudes at least), the battles we fight with our own ways of thinking are waged behind the scenes, only after the curtain has fallen.

The group of clients requesting mirrors countered with the feeble objection “We don’t want to walk around the Institute with toothpaste on our faces,” a weak lob which the board returned with a smash, saying they could ask their roommates whether or not they had toothpaste on their face, and when one of the clients came back with the backhanded return “I don’t have any friends here,” the board put the point away with a brisk “Then ask the guards.” I have to laugh, because in all these years no one has ever asked me if they have toothpaste on their face, and I always enjoy telling the story to newcomers at the Institute, whom I also sometimes tutor. As proof that it isn’t only the clients who grow spiritually here, but also the staff. I may have had doubts about the board’s decision at the time, but whatever doubts I had have since perished a thousand times.

If I had known that back then, on my grueling journey with that awful rattling suitcase on wheels, I could have spared myself a few lessons at the very beginning of my employment, which I had imagined would be more like the work of a prison guard in the old-world films, looking into cells through peepholes and that sort of thing.

To be honest, that was so many years ago now that I only vaguely recall what I imagined my work would be like, and my strong memories are all of how thirsty I was on the trip. The road leading to the Institute from the last stop on the city bus line was the kind that has a sign warning road closed when icy, but no gate blocking it off. It was like that with everything in the old world. Lies piled on lies piled on top of other lies, and ordinary human stupidity was one more reason why the unethical environment for the upbringing of girls lasted as long as it did.

As we approached the Institute, I saw spots before my eyes and almost took the imposing building, divided into several wings and ringed with a thick wall, for a mirage. With all the cars coming and going and the road being practically dirt, I was covered in dust. It surprised me to see such brisk traffic, but the reason would have been obvious if I had stopped to think. How else were the clients going to get to the Institute? The stop where I had alighted was the end of the bus line, and not everyone could afford a taxi, which in any case was an option only for clients who lived in the next town over, and most of ours came from somewhere else. From places where there was no Institute. Either that or they had chosen ours because of its reputation, short waiting period (admission here, unlike at the smaller facilities, was almost always immediate), and outstanding results (length of treatment was typically no longer than eighteen months). The Movement never bought into the idea of catchment areas. The freedom to decide one’s place of treatment for oneself was one of the Movement’s ethical maxims, and sometimes, too, the wives would decide, based on a recommendation from friends or a visit in person (public days are the same now as they’ve always been: the first and second Wednesday of every month). For that matter, a woman who comes in advance to gauge the facility’s effectiveness with her own eyes is the best guarantee of a successful ongoing recovery at home.

Obviously, I knew none of this at the time. I attributed all the traffic to some bizarre detour, though I couldn’t figure out why all the cars heading toward the Institute were driven by women, with men in the back seat, most of them either asleep or in a daze. If anyone back then had told me that it was because the men were on pills, I probably would have been

shocked. This in spite of the fact that it was generally known to be hard going with men sometimes, before they entered the Institute, especially if no one from their inner circle of friends had undergone treatment yet, which often resulted in ungrounded fears of reprisal. The Guardians of Manhood were constantly trying to mislead the men, fulminating about how the only healthy choice was not to get any treatment at all, which was why we sent out ambulance vans to pick them up. That was the first thing I noticed, too, before the sheer size of the meatpacking plant took my breath away.

There are always vans parked out in front of the plant, although the lot reserved for them is nowhere near as full now as it was when I started out, which makes sense, since the vans are for picking up men trying to avoid treatment and the number of them is constantly on the decline. Voluntary admissions now exceed involuntary (what does victory look like if not this?), and many men actually look forward to coming to the Institute and having a chance to relax. We're happy to let them do it, and those men come of their own accord. However, we're careful not to advertise our spa services. We may not reveal everything, but we can't be accused of lying, and our attorneys (all women) see to the rest. What greater relief could there be, for that matter, than ridding your mind of stupidity, so they're actually right about it being relaxing.

Most of the questions we get on open door days have to do with our treatment procedures. I had the same questions running through my mind as I knocked on the reception desk window. In shifting gears from ideals to realization, things had broken down so many times before in human history that the Guardians of Manhood would have been crazy not to use that against us, over and over again citing the historic collapse of communism, and every other -ism that they claimed lured people in with nice ideas, only to end in terror, chaos, a lower standard of living, and, ultimately, the corruption of the ideal itself, which then, shorn of credibility, simply died away. The Movement viewed this scaremongering by our enemies as a sign of success, since the acceptance of our beliefs as a "nice idea" was a monumental improvement over the days when we were labeled extremist, following the detonation of explosives in the Ministry of the Interior's basement—an act that catapulted the Movement from a misfit collection of "unfucked women" into the public eye and gave the old-world discourse a slap in the face that is now the subject of dissertations. Predictions of an inevitable debacle if our ideals were put into practice were the tactic of a rear guard in retreat. The Movement was too strong to ignore. You can label a third of the population misfits, but it's bound to backfire politically, and when a country erupts in protest, civil war is just one step away. Nobody wanted that. And maintaining the status quo by way of discursive dodges ultimately came to seem more complicated to anyone with any common sense than the "leap into the unknown" that the Guardians of Manhood were warning about.

I was assigned an office, a housing unit, and a numerical code giving me access to spaces that were off-limits to clients as well as to workers from the other sections, except for section heads. I received a copy of the internal regulations and a set of work clothes. Then I was shown the cafeteria, the warehouses, a few of the client bedrooms, and a few of the clients themselves (men with normal responses and basket cases too, no preselection by PR). To wrap things up, my section boss devoted two whole hours of her precious time to me. Yes. The Movement values its workers, and also takes an individual approach with every client. We are all individuals and deserve to be treated as such.

"Stick to the discourse no matter what, as long as it doesn't come off flat. Otherwise it'll boomerang, take your head off like a slingshot. The trick is to use their strength against them," my first section boss told me. Heavysset and in her fifties, she looked like the type of woman who ran a butcher shop, but she had a long-distance degree from Oxford. Appearance is meaningless in and of itself, as is hierarchy based on education and profession. My current section boss actually did used to work as a salesgirl in a butcher

shop. One of the great draws for recruits to the Institute is the fact that there are no glass ceilings here, as I can confirm from my own experience. My tutor made herself available to me throughout my twelve weeks of training. I think of her often when I do the same for my new coworkers now, and more and more often nowadays, some of them are men.

I'm sitting in a circle with the clients in Building D, which falls within the scope of my duties and is under the direction of the Movement's regional branch. The view from my workroom is taken up by buildings that used to be part of the meatpacking plant before they were occupied by Idea and Work. The work of the Movement is to transform the Idea into Work, and as I tell my clients the story of the little girl named Rita, some of them stare blankly out at the wall across the way, or through the windows giving onto the courtyard, which has been newly planted with decorative cherry trees (the bees' buzzing was so realistic, even I couldn't tell they were artificial, just like the cherries).

I usually start like this: "Rita merely showed signs of heightened sensitivity to the injustices of the world around her." Then, to help the residents absorb what that means, I tell them about that world. About how little Rita and her mother were walking down a boulevard in the European metropolis where our story begins, and in typical old-world style it was lined with hideous billboards. Rita pointed to one of them and asked her mother the question that sooner or later occurred to every little old-world girl, and the reason an ethical environment for the upbringing of girls didn't exist in those days was precisely because the question wasn't raised. It was a question that should never occur to any little girl, not because she shouldn't think for herself, but because she should have no reason to—regardless of whether she formulates the question aloud, or keeps it to herself for fear of the answer and as a result it eats away at her, little by little, on the inside.

An ethical environment for the development of little girls means that they see themselves as someone who looks and not a thing to be *looked at*. Little girls should focus on looking, outwardly, at the world, not on how somebody else looks at them, or outwardly the way that their mothers oftentimes did, on whether or not they looked sexy enough. In the old world, before little girls got used to it, they would gape in horror — then they would get over the horror of being their gender, which is what's known as accepting things for what they are and doing it for one's own good. For one's own good, paving the way to one's own hell, to put it in terms that everyone can easily understand.

People used to say (out of earshot, of course): Your value as a being drops by one point every hour after the age of twenty, and you don't find out your total until a recording says, "Deduct for face and figure," which means your femininity index has declined to a value near zero (pharmaceutical firms were clearing record profits from the sale of estrogen pills in the days when the Movement chalked up its first modest successes). In the old world, women could usually recognize that their face was sufficiently hideous years before they reached the point where their bodies, squeezed into shorts reinforced with a triple layer of Lycra, still held up, more or less, but no one considered faces to be of value anymore. There were a few studies in the pre-Movement period that looked at what happened to women who lost their femininity, but no one could define femininity without referring to charm, and any definition of charm broke down the moment youth was out of the picture. A few women, undeterred, nevertheless declared that they still *felt* young, and there was some media propaganda to back them up on this (depressed women are less productive at work). Plastic surgeons and the cosmetics industry, however, promoted the thesis that "feeling isn't enough," arguing that a woman's age should be concealed as much as possible, not only because a penis would fail to sustain an erection in the presence of an openly geriatric vagina, but because the whole thing was so inextricably tangled up with love.

In short, the times were not just ripe for change, but crying out for it desperately. Still, some claimed it was a hormonal deviation caused by pollution. They said sexual desire in older women was no longer as strong as it used to be (though according to Movement ideologues, it “just wasn’t discussed in the past”). In the old-world way of thinking, women were supposed to renounce desire once they reached a certain age. Making an effort to be attractive was viewed as a silly bother, although fooling people with your looks was viewed as acceptable, since women did it in order to ensure their right to love. That’s right. That’s how desperate things were in those days.

We had to scramble to get our bearings in the new reality, after thousands of years of “not giving a shit,” and yes, being criticized for being vulgar, too. I say “we,” because I subscribe to the Idea. In those days I was a little girl.

My feelings as a child were similar to the feelings I had driving in the car with my mother as we cluelessly wound our way down one poorly paved district road after another and not one of the villages had the same name as the one where we were supposed to turn onto the main road. My mother had turned off the GPS, to harden herself, as she put it, for the moment when the hackers would bring the world’s machines to their knees. As she sat behind the wheel swearing, because it was dark and raining out, I enjoyed the adventure even though at the same time I was scared.

I say to my clients: “The question Rita asked her mother as they walked along the boulevard and she pointed to the billboard was: ‘Mommy, why is that lady naked?’”

Whether the pair of full-figured breasts in a micro bra and the butt cheeks hanging out of high-cut shorts were an advertisement for peanuts, herb butter, paint supplies, or the latest pulse-tracking device has been forgotten, but Rita’s question became a milestone. Rita herself in fact later referred to it as the origin of the awakening that led to the Movement’s founding. An awakening from ages of languishing in a humiliating limbo. The symbolic start of the revolution.

There are those who claim that Rita’s story has been falsely embellished by supporters of the Movement. That her life is wrapped in an aura of lies. That the fate of the founder’s mother is fabricated, distorted, and at least half manufactured to manipulate, glorify, and explain the beginnings of a sea change in society that they themselves don’t even understand. In short, it didn’t suit their needs. Instead of offering a counterargument, all I will say is this: The story I’m telling here is the one I have available. I am not overstating, misrepresenting, or inventing the things that I have heard, read, and experienced, and if anything I say here took place any differently from the way I describe it, it does nothing to change the fact of where we ended up.

“My mother’s silence was ominous,” Rita would say with a smile whenever she told the story herself at Movement gatherings. It was a smile that appeared in countless photographs and TV broadcasts, and, once the Movement was more established, at prestigious universities, whose honorary doctorates Rita declined with the same smile each and every time. Her existential orientation and mindset ruled out any collaboration with these institutions, which, despite the intellectual resources at their disposal, in all their years of operation still hadn’t been able to achieve what Rita had. A girl from an ordinary family who started out with nothing, yet she dragged the truth into the light like a mirror in which the old world couldn’t help but see itself for what it really was, and only then did it begin to rear up and fight back. In the old world, a woman’s half-naked body, put on display to be ogled by random passersby, served no purpose but commerce, the sale of goods, and not only was no one called to account for this unethical environment, but hardly anyone gave it a second thought. So the Movement was left with no choice.

