

A Brief Exchange of Fire



The story of unextinguished, belated desire

Roma, the main character of *A Brief Exchange of Fire* by Zyta Rudzka, is a poet. She is almost seventy, intelligent, oversensitive, and vulgar. She knows she is getting older – for some time her body has been refusing to obey. Nevertheless, Roma walks around the city with a hunter's keen eye: she lusts after passing young men, she loses herself in memories of her romances and marriages. Along the way, she tells in brief the story of her absent daughter. If the narrator were a man, *A Brief Exchange of Fire* would probably not stand out from other similar novels. At the end of the day, the story of unextinguished, belated desire is a well-worn theme. Yet this time we hear the voice of an independent, embittered "old lady," who doesn't hesitate to declare her grudges and claims against the world. She is aware of how silly she is, but is still hungry for life. Roma's distinct voice is the strongest point of the book. This poet's stories are accompanied by monologues by her mother. We, therefore, learn the stories of three generations of women. Each of the main characters has the same flaw, perhaps the aftermath of wartime trauma, or perhaps simply a hereditary defect. Regar-

dless of where they live, they seem nevertheless to share a similar fate. Equally rebellious and lost, they have different ways of celebrating their sense of hurt. One might even posit that *A Brief Exchange of Fire* generally tells the story of a certain unsettling model of femininity, one fairly widespread in this part of Europe. Rudzka's women are independent, but lonely and unfulfilled. They do without men out of necessity, because if men appear at all it is in the form of executioners, casual lovers, or eternal boys who need to be looked after into old age. Left on their own, these women battle the whole world, attempting to save themselves and their loved ones, but sometimes they surrender. Language plays an important role in Zyta Rudzka's book. As so often with this author, it works in short sentences, is sometimes stylized into slang, and is full of deliberate inconsistencies. Roma and her mother speak to survive. Yet can words cope with what is muddled up and unclear within ourselves? It is worth reading *A Brief Exchange of Fire* to make up your own mind.

Marta Kwaśnicka, translated by Sean Gasper Bye

Cyryl lives on a small lane projecting off of General Zajęczek Street; I'm on my way there, murmuring his name: Cyryl. Cyryl. Hard. Sweet and syrupy. A hard candy.

Maybe I'll finally get something. Rough and frantic, and finally, putting my dress back on, I'll tenderly remark:

Did you have a good time with me, you dog?

The apartment is the opposite of its owner – narrow and tall. It smells like onions, men's sweat, and wild lovemaking, in other words, Poland for beginners.

We're sitting in the kitchen, the flooring is partially torn up. On the floor are a woman's sandal with a wedge heel and the insole slipping out, an empty jar of mayonnaise, a fork with no handle.

I feel more and more as though Cyryl is looking at me like I've come to borrow some money to top off my pension. This is the first time I'm sure he saw my social security number in the light of day.

I'm afraid I'll want to touch him. To hold onto him. I begin to daydream of laying down beside him. Close. To stay that way, just like that, until morning. I'm afraid. I'm very afraid of myself.

So I lie to him. I take off my overcoat and warn him he's not my type.

The young man looks at me like I was speaking Tlingit. Ejective fricative consonants in the mouths of Indians in Alaska and Canada.

I start to explain:

I'm done with doctors, translators, literary types. Know what I mean? Just simple guys. I want to take my clothes off in front of train conductors, lumberjacks, machinists, when the passion takes me.

Cyryl speaks up:

Pardon me. What are you talking about?

About how this doesn't mean anything. Anyway, I've always woken up beside the wrong men. But doesn't that give you a thrill, my boy, hmm?

I peer at the young man, narrowing my eyes. He looks like he has no soul inside him. But what do I care about his soul, it's enough his body is at arm's length.

Christ, lines from airport novels make us feel so good. Suddenly he asks, sounding worried as a damn boy scout:

Are you sure your heart doesn't hurt?

No, I snarl. So what?

Because you. . .

I what?

The way you're holding yourself.

I'm holding up fine. I've got a nice patina.

You're holding tight to your heart.

My heart is no threat to me. My heart is holding up

well, it hasn't gotten much use.

Airport novels slipping in again. Cheap flights for solitary travelers.

Suddenly he asks in a half-whisper:

I'm really sorry, but how long are we going to spend together, approximately? It's just I've got something scheduled.

I answer that at my age, nothing will last long.

Excerpt translated by Sean Gasper Bye



ZYTA
RUDZKA
Born 1964

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Uczty i głody, 1995

Pałac Cezarów, 1997

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Dziewczyny Banda, 2004

Ślicznotka doktora Josefa, 2006

Zyta Rudzka is also the author of numerous award-winning dramas.

Foreign language translations

Germany, Switzerland, Russia, Croatia, Bulgaria – in anthologies

Selected awards

Gdynia Drama Award (2011)

Gold Remi, Houston WorldFest Independent Festival (2016)