





Julia Sherwood

[ˈdʒʊliə ˈʃɜːwɒd]

Julia Sherwood is an award-winning translator and literary organiser. She translates fiction and non-fiction from Slovak, Czech, Polish and Russian. Her most recent book-length translations from the Slovak include *Big Love* by Balla and *Bellevue* by Ivana Dobráková; *The Night Circus and other stories* by Uršula Kovalyk, *Fleeting Snow* by Pavel Vilikovský. She currently administers the group Slovak Literature in English Translation, co-curates the website slovakliterature.com and curates the Slovak List for Seagull Books. She lives in London.

T R A N S L A T O R

FICTION

A F R U M P Y W O M A N

Jana Juráňová

[ˈjana ˈjuraːnovaː]

Jana Juráňová is a novelist, playwright, translator, and co-founder of the feminist project ASPEKT. Five of her books were finalists for the prestigious Slovak national award Anasoft Litera, and several of her books have been translated to various languages. Two of which have been translated into English: the para-biographical novel *Žila som s Hviezdoslavom* (*Ilona. My Life with the Bard*); and a book interview with veteran Slovakian journalist Agneša Kalinová, *Mojich 7 životov* (*My Seven Lives*).

A U T H O R

She was standing at a bus stop. A long bendy bus pulled up aggressively by the kerb, making the crowd that had been waiting impassively jump back to escape being showered by an urban cocktail of crushed ice, mud, cigarette butts and God knows what else. Alena, who was standing at a safe distance, observed the spectacle and managed to dodge the spray. Her feet got wet but only because the sewerage system in this town was a shambles, with not only the roads but also the pavements covered by an inch of urban cocktail. She was wearing a pair of sandals, closed at the front but open at the heel, so not even her pink socks offered enough protection. She wiped the dirt off her naked calf with a paper hankie and headed for the back door, which fewer people used to get on the bus. She found a seat right at the back and huddled by the window. Outside the temperature hovered around zero. She was dressed in a light jacket, a summer blouse and knee-length skirt. What kind of person wears this kind of skirt these days? But what was she to do if she had wardrobe full of clothes that not even homeless women were interested in?

Alena rarely goes out and when she does, she doesn't care if she has put on a skirt or not. Most often she doesn't and leaves it hanging in the wardrobe. She spends her days at home at her old computer translating novels, essays and technical articles from Spanish, so it makes no difference whether she has put on a skirt or if she sits there just in her underwear – depending on circumstances, the time of day, her mood and the weather, of course. She doesn't feel so good when the air pressure is low. She usually doesn't change out of her nightie. "Usually" means she managed to do a bit of shopping the day before and fix herself something for supper, or just a slice of bread and butter. Or even just bread without butter. Why stuff herself if she spends all day sitting? She loves literature and literature doesn't mind her not being perfectly groomed, literature doesn't despise her for the way she looks. Literature, her beloved *belles lettres*, is happy to have Alenka, as her colleagues in the publishing house call her, devote her time to it. She, in turn, is grateful to literature for holding out amidst the barrage of TV series, reality shows and computer games. That is why she doesn't mind if literature sometimes gives her a headache by being too demanding, or puts her nerves on edge, or drives her mad with convoluted syntax.

Alena lets literature get away with everything because literature brings her solace and gives her life meaning. She has felt the same about everyone she has loved but, unlike them, literature has never let her down.

The day may come when literature will vanish from this world but Alena is certain she won't live to see it and this certainty fills her with gratitude.

She doesn't know if her son will live to see this day but knowing his priorities, he is not likely to lose any sleep over it. She loves her son more than anything else, but literature is not really his thing. When he was young, she used to read him fairytales and he would listen enraptured, but as he got older, he was drawn to computer games and that's how it has stayed. What happens in the future is not her problem, though she is already sorry for some women writers, particularly her favourite ones and those who are much younger than her. What will they do once the most important part of their lives has become extinct? She doesn't have the energy to shed tears over this and anyway, her tears have never achieved anything, all they did was exhaust her, while all the things she had shed tears over went on as they liked. Now that she is over sixty there is no point crying.

Actually, what surprises her is that she is still asked to do translations. A new generation of translators has grown up, Spanish authors are not as sought after as those writing in English, but work does come her way, mostly the kind of books no one else is keen on: the difficult ones. She is fine with that. Work helps to take her mind off the past as well as the future. She appreciates the fact that there are still people writing difficult works like these, and even if they aren't, such works have been written in the past and they are here for her to translate. By the time she's completed one book, her younger colleagues have finished two or three, but never mind. She doesn't make a lot of money but at least she doesn't have to pay much tax. As long as her brain is active, she will translate. She is fully aware of what others think of her: that she lost her marbles a long time ago. Today, for example, she could have put tights on so as not to scandalise people but then she would have to wash them and washing powder is expensive. This way all she has to do is wash her feet, rub her socks with some ordinary soap and rinse them.

She does look after herself but she is not prepared to spend money on expensive toiletries. The trouble is, the cheap ones no longer exist. Cheap soap, toothpaste or washing powder are hard to find, the price of everything has gone up and she has no choice but buy expensive stuff, even if not the most expensive.

Alena is at odds with the whole world but she doesn't grumble. What would be the point? She would only drive herself into a corner. She has other ways of showing the world that she's angry. For instance, by putting on a light

jacket and sandals that are closed at the front but open at the heel. She finds that easy because she has never felt cold since going through menopause. And she saves money on heating and hot water.

It's been a while since she last saw her son, as the camera on her old computer doesn't work. Her son lives at the other end of the world, so she has no one to help with the camera and no way of seeing him. She worries about him.

Argentina. The country of her dreams. She has never been there. Even though her son is half Argentinian. How on earth did that happen? And in a life in which hardly anything ever happened at that?

In her younger days, still under communism, she worked at the Academy of Sciences' Institute for Literature. Nobody there knew anything about her. She was completely immersed in literature – Spanish, Argentinian, Mexican. Books were hard to come by, but it wasn't impossible, with Cuba being the springboard before communism collapsed.

This man from Argentina, whose name she'd rather not recall, came to Czechoslovakia and hung around Bratislava for some time. And then he left, never to return. He didn't want her to follow him, and she wouldn't have been able to do so even if she had wanted to. But she did hope that he would come back, or that she would join him one day. When she wrote to tell him that she was pregnant he didn't reply, but she kept on writing. She has never asked him for anything. None of her letters have come back, so she kept writing regularly – who else was she supposed to write to?

While she was on maternity leave there were some developments at the Institute. The head of her department had embarked on an affair with his secretary and the only surprising thing was that she was the same age as he was. They both continued to live with their respective spouses while pursuing a sort of high-minded, deep friendship, which it was impossible not to notice.

The editor-in-chief of the Institute's journal fell in love with a colleague who accepted her advances. Even though the relationship may have remained platonic, the editor's husband left her, causing her great unhappiness. She divorced him but her scholar colleague went back to his wife, even showing up with her at the office Christmas party: she sat next to him beaming with joy, while the editor-in-chief cried her heart out in the kitchen and left early. There is nothing that spices up an old marriage than adultery forgiven. It never fails to inject new life into a stale relationship.

After returning from maternity leave Alena didn't have to go to the office every day and could work from home on some days, but these developments did not escape her attention. At first no one at the institute knew who the father of her child was but after she confided in some girlfriends, they made sure word got around. What happened next was unexpected: people started to avoid her. Not only women but men, too. She could feel their disdain almost physically. She had no explanation for it until one day, while in the ladies that only a thin partition separated from the men's toilet, she overheard someone talking about this poor wretch, one of those women that a man needs like a fish needs a bicycle. Oh well, at least she's had some fun but now she's paying for it. And so on and so forth. She was quite glad to have overheard this, as now at least she knew where she stood. She was also quite glad that she only heard them and didn't have to see them. Those men who needed her like a fish needs a bicycle would drive their old Skodas to work; it wasn't a fancy car but it was the best there was. She, meanwhile, would walk or hop on the bus for a few stops. She had a flat in the town centre in those days. But it was too small for her and her son, so she exchanged it for a bigger one, on a housing estate. Since then she'd been taking the bus.

The boy was growing. Things weren't easy. He didn't show her much respect and sometimes she worried how he would turn out. She took him to the countryside during school holidays where her parents lived and that was some help, even though they were far from enthusiastic. But they did not berate her and took her side when people gossiped and helped her as best they could.

She kept herself to herself. She didn't go out and didn't socialise with anyone apart from one or two girlfriends from university. But neither of them enjoyed books. Most of the time, she had just herself for company. She would read, translate, and look after her son. She'd take him to football matches since tickets for ice hockey were too expensive. She tried to keep him on the straight and narrow to make sure he wouldn't fall in with the wrong crowd, and to her own surprise, she succeeded. She spent a lot of time with him and in summer his grandpa would step in, so the boy had a male role model at least some of the time. She never looked for another man. Sometimes she wondered what would happen if her Argentinian suddenly turned up in Bratislava, but she would quickly chase such daydreams away. She knew full well that these were the stuff of Mills and Boon romances, not of real life. That was why she never translated romances, even though she had the opportunity.

He could have come after the Iron Curtain fell. But he didn't. And neither did he invite her to visit him. He never answered her letters. Sometimes she would slip a note from her son into the envelope, and he began sending them Christmas cards with a pre-printed text and his signature.

Her son took to writing longer letters to his father and she made him take Spanish lessons – it was only right and proper seeing as he was half Argentinian. He remained a football fan and supported Argentina.

Later, there would be a letter from Argentina every now and then, though it was addressed to his son and contained no personal information, no more than a few lines. But the boy was happy to have a father.

She had no idea what kind of life he had. Did he have a family? Or more than one family even? A former and a current wife, a bunch of children? Was he well off? He certainly wasn't when she met him, but he could since have made a fortune. Or lost one.

All her life, she dressed unassumingly. She was a blonde and her face lacked any remarkable features. She wore her hair smoothed down and never put on any make up. On principle. Some women would wear make up even when they stayed at home. Not her though. Men never found her attractive. She never made the beauty rankings at the Institute, not even the lowest rung, and it suited her just fine. She was aware that people regarded her with disdain but she also knew that her job was secure because whenever an article was needed for the Institute's journal or a lecture to be given at a conference, she would always oblige and when she gave a paper people would listen though they never told her what they thought of it. But she felt that at least for a moment she wasn't disdained.

Watching other women put on make up and vie in fawning over their learned male colleagues gave her a sense of freedom. Some relationships at the Institute were more lasting and some even outlived the regime. They had their marriages at home and their deep, and evidently also erotic, friendships at work. Alena was not interested in any of this. She felt no envy. She saw how her female colleagues staggered under the weight of their relationships. Who knows what it was like for them at home, what it felt like to spend weekends – not to mention Christmas – with their unwanted other halves. Perhaps they enjoyed being at work more than being at home, who knows. She had no desire to be in their shoes and was happy not to take part in this game into which women, mostly the unmarried ones, had been dragged. They had no choice. It was loyalty and career or nothing.

Gradually her dress style turned from plain to outright frumpy. Not shabby, just weird. She combined colours that were considered incompatible in those days, like blue and yellow. She caught people giving her contemptuous glances. Or orange with pink. After the fall of communism private boutiques started to pop up and became her haven. One colour she never wore was red as she associated it with dumb communism, but she liked all shades of purple and yellow. She loved the kinds of colour combinations favoured in warmer climes.

Her son graduated from university and found a girlfriend. She made an effort to get on with her, relishing the possibility of a larger family. Suddenly things started to look up, prospects for the future opened up, even if that future was her son's. She even toned down her wilder colour combinations to gain greater respect from her future daughter-in-law. She started cooking Sunday lunches.

Meanwhile the Institute became gradually depopulated as its top ranks moved on to take various government posts, some taking their mistresses along and putting them in charge of their offices, while others replaced them with younger, more presentable girlfriends.

Alena was offered the post of editor-in-chief of the Institute's journal but turned it down. It would have meant having to interact with people much more, while she needed her peace and quiet. Publishers gave her more and more translation work and she would be up until the early hours to supplement her income. Eventually the Institute closed down, as all the distinguished men had moved into politics or retired. Things were not so easy for the women who used to form their retinue. Some requalified as teachers of Slovak or foreign languages but they didn't find the work satisfying. It wasn't as cushy as the jobs at the academy where they didn't have to get up early, could work at home, sometimes late into the night, but have a lie-in the next day. They might put the washing machine on and read the abstract of an article. But having to teach, getting up at the crack of dawn and not finishing until late in the afternoon, dealing with adolescents, filling out forms... For a while Alena was worried that she, too, might end up this way but a miracle happened, the second one in her life. This one proved longer-lived than her love affair: she was offered a job at a publishing house.

She edited translations from the Spanish as well as translating herself. She had to go to the office three days a week and worked from home for the rest of the time. She no longer had to do the rounds of second-hand

clothes shops and ended up wearing the same clothes day in, day out. Surely no one in the office on Wednesday would remember what she had worn on Monday?

Her son grew up. He was planning to get married. That's when a letter came from his father. Asking if he would like to come and visit him. His girlfriend wanted to go as well but his father could afford only the air fare for one, and a one-way ticket at that. So her son took off on his own.

To begin with, Alena and the girlfriend would get together and have a little cry and she continued to invite her for lunch on Sundays but that, too, fizzled out. After a year she found someone else and to cut all ties she also took against Alena. All she had left now was her old computer and Skype that wasn't working properly.

Phone calls are expensive, but she splashed out on a smartphone and discovered the joys of whatsapp. She was now able to speak to her son every now and then, sometimes even see him on the screen. Never his father though. After all, he wasn't her husband. Just the father of her son. And his son wouldn't talk about him so she never learned if he had a family or, indeed, how many families, and children, what he did for a living, how he was, or what he looked like after all those years. She didn't even have a photo from the old days, as they never had a picture taken together.

She asked her son whether he was coming back. He said neither yes nor no.

Sometimes she wouldn't notice until she got back home if she'd been hot or cold. Like the time she went out shoeless and in short sleeves in March, or put on a thick jumper in summer. Her colleagues gave her strange looks. Once she ran into a former colleague in the street, an ex-politician who had just lost in the election. He stared at her with disgust and then she heard him say to someone: just look at her, it's people like these who don't appreciate what freedom is, they can't even look after themselves. They're the ones who mess things up for us. They have no conception of independence. God knows who this female voted for. She's lost her marbles. You can't even feel sorry for her.

Things could be much worse, she consoled herself.

There was Jitka, for example. Things turned out much worse for her.

Jitka started working at the Institute in the 1980s. She was in her early thirties, married, led an orderly life and didn't go to parties. She wasn't

blessed with a great deal of imagination and wasn't much of a scholar but she did a conscientious, if pointless, job. This was quite common at the Academy in those days. No one did any real work but some were able to liven it up. Jitka was just a plodder with little to do, but she always did it conscientiously. She would dust off books, copy articles, pop out to do a bit of shopping for the head of the department; there was always something. She kept a pair of slippers at work to change into, driving crazy the Institute's resident aesthete, a man with a pointed grey beard who liked to show off his wit on the stairs on the way to meetings. Jitka paid him no heed, keeping her slippers under her desk and putting them on every morning.

One day, all of a sudden, she vanished. Rumour had it that she got a job in a government office, a ministry or some such thing. Thing is, in those days Jitka's father was a big shot. A communist big shot. And the man she married climbed up the greasy pole over her back or rather, over the marital bed, and once he reached a sufficient height he no longer needed his father-in-law and started cheating on Jitka. In a word, a golddigger, totalitarian style.

Compared to hers, Alena's life wasn't that bad. She had her work, her son, even if he was far away, and the memories of her youth which included a brief romance with a man who hadn't robbed her. On the contrary, he gave her a child even if he had never sent her a penny for his keep and had now taken him away. Her life had been filled to the brim. Except that now there was a rather big void in it.

Even literature becomes tedious if it there's nothing in the soul that resonates with it.

She ought to tidy up her wardrobe. Take everything out, wash and iron it, sort it out, throw out a few items and buy a couple of things instead. She also ought to prepare some clothes for her coffin. Something black and white, though she didn't own anything in these colours. And a pair of shoes as well. Her son is unlikely to come back; he may not be able to afford the airfare, and even if he did come, how would he ever get back to his father? She still has a couple of friends; she will leave a letter with them. She would definitely not actively seek out death, she isn't someone inclined to do that. And who knows, a book might come her way, one that focuses on an older woman who lives alone without the people she loves and that tells you how to come to terms with people who turn away from

you with looks of pity, disgust and surprise. Perhaps they think that she is an alcoholic although she has never been a drinker. It's just the medication that makes her face puffy.

She still had a pink jumper at home, a pair of green pumps, and a white blouse. There was also a light blue jacket and a floral waistcoat. The other day she saw from the bus a notice in the window of a second-hand shop, a special offer: everything for one euro. And there was this beautiful summer dress. She would give herself a Christmas treat. She had no idea on what occasion she might wear it. There was going to be a Christmas party at the publishing house, but she had never gone to such parties. And she wouldn't be going this year either. But she might put on the dress at the time of the party. She would make herself a cup of tea and find a book. A book about a woman her age going through something similar to what she was going through. She was definitely no longer interested in romance, they could all stuff it. All those secretaries and wives trying to decide whether to fawn over their husbands or lovers. She didn't care about them. And those politicians, her former colleagues, they'd been put through the meat grinder and their mistresses had grown old. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, as her grandmother used to say; it's apparently a quote from Ecclesiastes. That makes sense. Perhaps she ought to read it. And then she would find a book that's about her. Perhaps even translate it. Even if just two or three women in the whole country read it. It didn't matter.

It's supposed to rain tomorrow. She ought to get her wellies out and pull them onto her bare feet. She loved the cool sensation of walking around with bare legs, it kept her alive. Feet without socks or tights, that was freedom. And sometimes bare arms, too. She must just pay no heed to anyone who stares at her. Who knows, perhaps her son will get in touch. If not now, then one day.

That ex-politician, formerly a distinguished scholar at the Institute, thought she should be in the nuthouse. She wasn't sure if he knew where he belonged and if he realised it. Whereas she knew exactly where she belonged. She had always known and behaved accordingly. And everyone else could mind their own business. She had never been in anyone's way. On the contrary, she had helped those who felt sorry for her, especially women, by making them feel that compared to her they were happy, loved and ever so kind.

No, she didn't owe anyone anything.

